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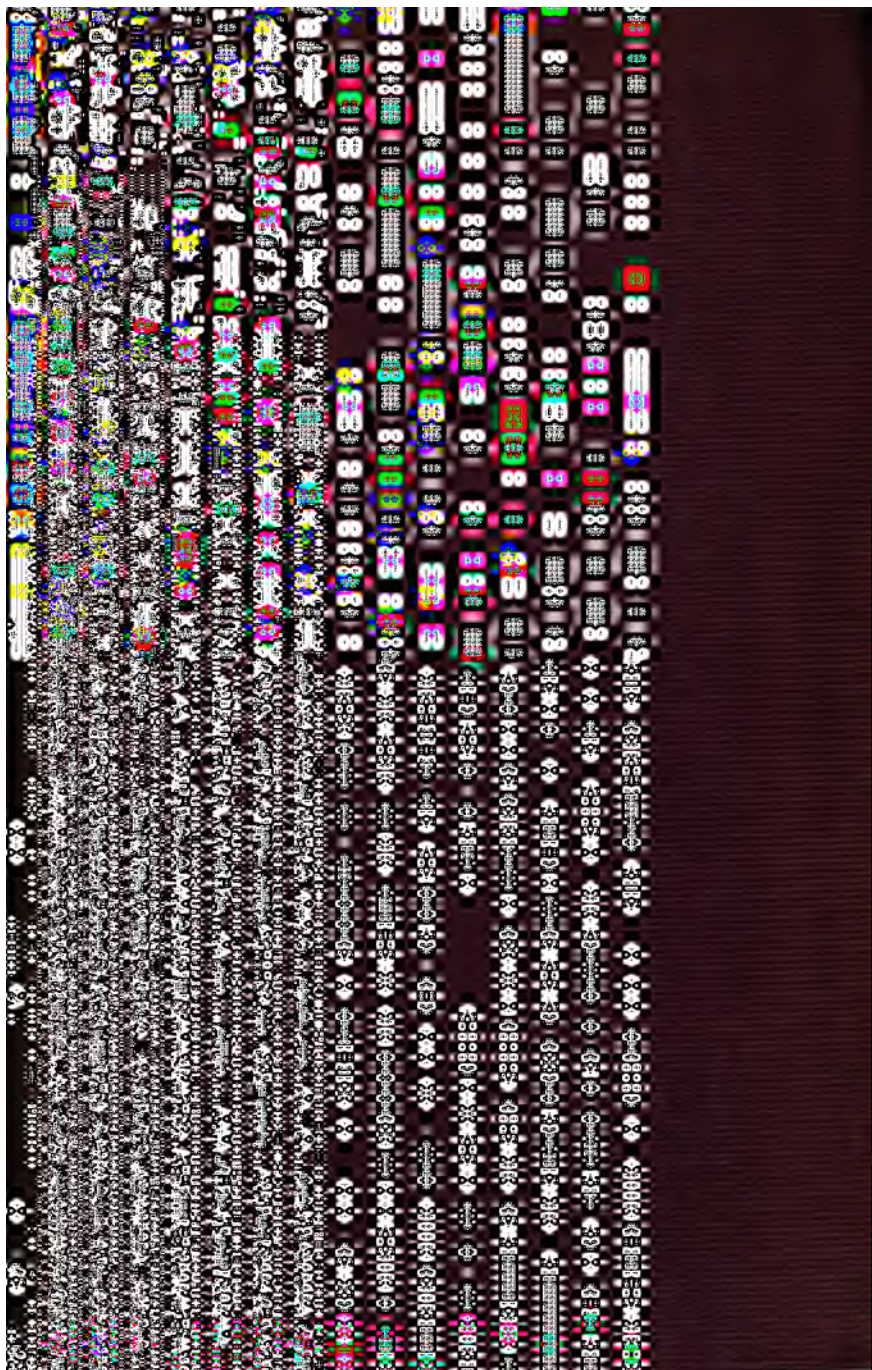
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THE
EARLY CHRISTIANS:

THEIR
MANNERS AND CUSTOMS,
TRIALS AND SUFFERINGS.

BY
THE REV. W. PRIDDEN, M.A.,
CURATE OF NORTH OCKENDON, ESSEX.

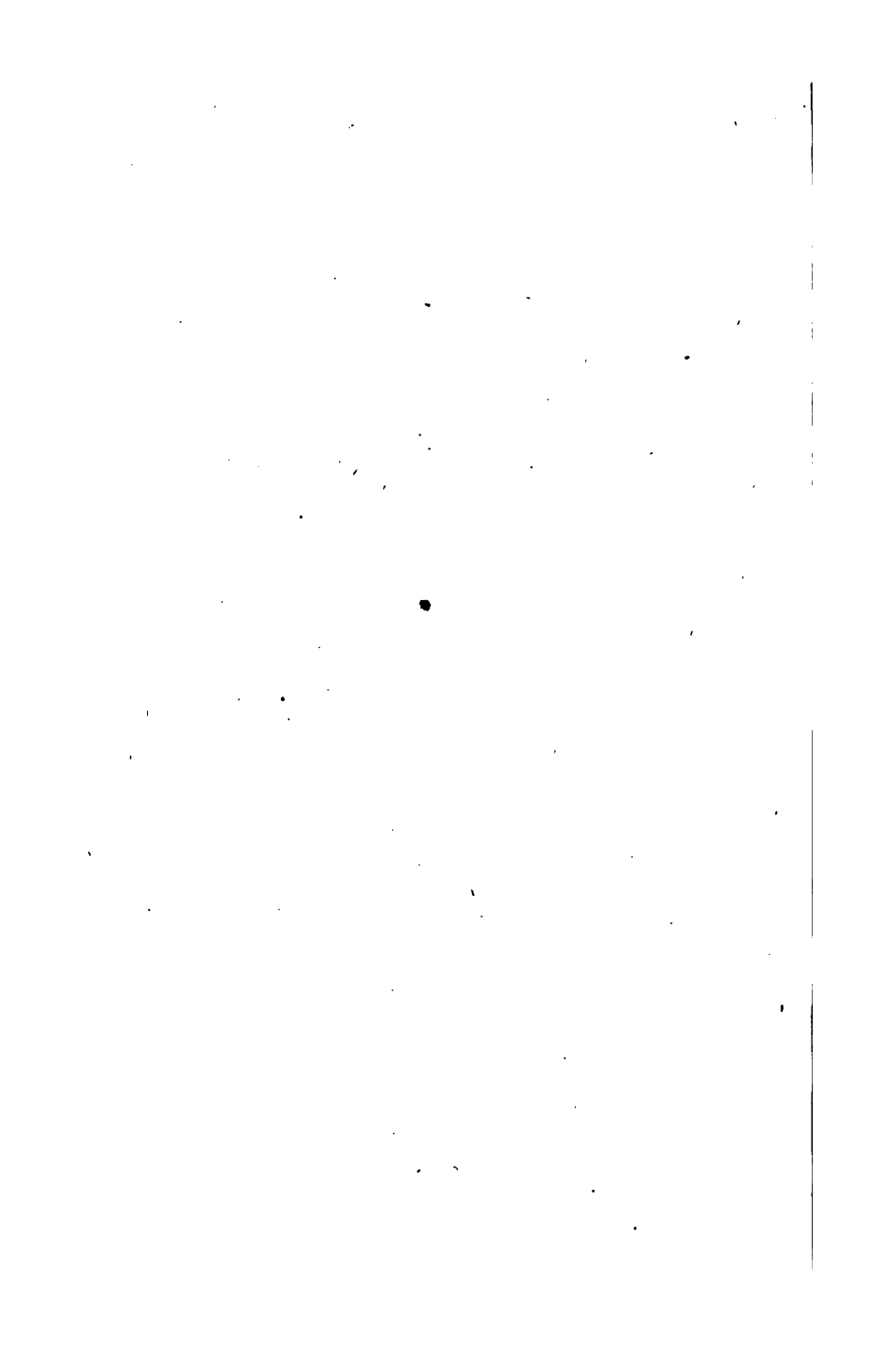
The way to bliss lies not on beds of down,
And he that had no cross deserves no crown.

LONDON :
JOHN W. PARKER, WEST STRAND.

M.DCCC.XXXVII.

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INTRODUCTION.

To give to any Christian who has been taught to read his Bible some correct ideas of the state of the Church of Christ, in the times that immediately followed the death of the Apostles; to show by various accounts and passages, taken from writers of credit, some of the particular customs, ways of life, and habits of thinking, common among the first believers in our holy Religion; to point out also in what respects the Church of England has followed them; in a word, to impart a general knowledge of the character of the early Christians during their gradual, but yet rapid, increase from a mere handful of despised and persecuted men to a vast multitude scattered over nearly all the earth;—such are the chief objects of this little work. Many of the records which have come down to us of the behaviour of the early Christians must fill every thinking mind with admiration and astonishment. The boldness, the zeal, the tenderness, the virtue, the faith, the devotion, displayed by them would seem improbable in a tale of fancy; and nevertheless they are recorded in histories bearing upon them the stamp and mark of truth itself; they are described, not merely by admiring friends, but also by the astonished enemies of the Gospel. Did we not know the spring

from which their virtues flowed, we could scarcely credit the undoubted facts which have been preserved respecting the behaviour of the first believers. And as the assurance, that, although surprising, they are true, must give these an advantage over all merely fanciful descriptions of goodness, however skilfully written, so in another respect these Christian records possess an advantage over all other true histories.

Every person of feeling must take more delight in the history of his own country than in that of any foreign land. Now, with regard to the early history of Christianity, all believers must take an interest in it, as much as every Englishman must take an interest in the history of England—nay, a great deal more so. For when all differences between one nation and another shall have long since passed away, the difference between him who *is* a Christian and him who *is not*, shall for ever remain. As subjects of that heavenly kingdom, which, though not *of* the world, is *in* the world, we must, were it only from mere curiosity, wish to know something about its rise and progress, its hindrances and supports, its lengthened troubles, and its final victories. And in gratifying this natural curiosity, while we amuse our leisure-hours, and increase our stock of knowledge, we may also improve our lives. From the example of the first Christians may be drawn lessons of the noblest kind, and in their behaviour may be found the choicest specimens of a virtue, at once too lofty and too lowly for mere human

nature ever to attain. In their holy conduct we see a pattern which can never be surpassed, but which we, being Christians as they were, may ourselves aspire to equal. Or if the different circumstances in which we are placed render this impossible, still may we learn from the cheerfulness with which they performed their severe duties, thankfully to perform our comparatively light duties ; still may we be led, when we consider how meekly even the greatest trials were endured by them, to strive the more earnestly to endure our small trials with patience and resignation.

The chief reasons for the cruelty so universally practised upon the early Christians seem to have been, first, the hatred felt by the heathens against their religion and mode of life ; secondly, the ignorance in which these unbelievers were,—and in which from scorn they were quite content to remain,—respecting the faith and duties of Christianity ; and, thirdly, the evil conduct of certain persons calling themselves Christians, although they were, in reality, anything but members of the catholic or universal Church of Christ. Keeping in view all these circumstances, and not losing sight, meanwhile, of the desperate struggles of that enemy of souls whose reign was so speedily to be shaken by the might of the Gospel, we can scarcely wonder at the bitterness and cruelty, with which the truth, as soon as it began to spread itself over the world, was attacked by all those who yet remained under the power of falsehood.

In tracing the progress of this great struggle, and observing the temper with which it was conducted by the first professors of our holy Religion, we may find much amusement, but we must not be satisfied with this. Unless we derive improvement and instruction from this study, our trouble will be but poorly repaid. Above all, (to repeat a warning already given,) contented thankfulness for every blessing, and patient submission under every trial, should be the result of our consideration of the history of the early Christians. If no sufferings could overpower their faith, if no misfortunes could conquer their hope, if no scornful words, no cruel torments, could freeze up their charity, where can *we* find an excuse, should we be found wanting in these Christian virtues? Fighting in the same cause with those Christian heroes,—serving under the same great Captain, struggling against the same mortal enemies, if we wish to be successful as they were, we must follow their example. The glorious path is already a beaten one; if we find it *difficult*, we must remember it is not *impossible* to be trodden; if we feel it to be wearisome, let us recollect whither it is leading us.

THE EARLY CHRISTIANS.

CHAPTER I.

HATRED OF HEATHENS AGAINST CHRISTIANS.

THE chief reason, no doubt, for the unquenchable hatred with which, in its first beginnings, the religion of Christ was attacked by the heathens, was its excellence. Nothing more surely calls forth the fury of the wicked than that which is really good. To those who delight in wrong, all that is right must needs be an object of disgust; to those who love falsehood and darkness, the light of truth, however beautiful in itself, can never be welcome. And as such persons are seldom very scrupulous in their conduct towards those whom they dislike, they will generally, if it is in their power, show their bitterness of heart against the righteous in some other way than mere words. In short, it was as natural for the cruel heathen to vex and persecute the harmless Christian as for the lion or the wolf to fall upon and devour the innocent animal he may have marked for his prey. In the wild beast, it is instinct that bids him attack the unprotected flocks; in the heathen it was sin and a

reprobate mind that, stifling all better feelings, urged him to inflict upon his unoffending fellow-creatures (weak in this world's strength, but strong and stout-hearted even to death, in their inner soul,) injuries with which it would be unjust and disgraceful to visit the very worst offences.

But while we bear in mind this grand reason for the hatred that was so long and so fiercely manifested against the light of our religion, when it first dawned upon the world,—a hatred of which we shall soon see many sad and undeniable examples,—we may with a little thought discover other causes of the evil treatment which it received. Men are often tempted to hurt and injure those who do not agree with them in opinion, and nothing, certainly, could be more contrary, than was the religion of Christ to all the oldest and most favourite notions of the heathens. They had no idea of worshipping, as we do, an unseen God. They had always been in the habit of falling down before images which their own hands had made, and when they found the Christians refusing to do this, or to liken to any thing here below the Maker of Heaven and Earth, they accused them of being atheists,—of having no God at all*. This charge was eagerly listened to, and

* So little notion had any of the heathens of an unseen all-seeing God, that we read of a certain Christian who, when brought before the judge for his religion, was charged with worshipping the air.

occasioned much bad feeling against the Christian religion, on which account it was often taken notice of by many of the early writers. One great object with these was to expose the folly of image-worship, and thus to show what good reasons they had for refusing to practise it. "If you are sure," it was said, "that your gods are dwelling in the highest Heavens, what cause or what excuse have you for making images of them, since you know for certain to whom to pour forth your prayers, and seek for *help in your time of need*? But if you do not believe this, or if (to speak with moderation) you are in doubt about it, even then, what reason is there in making and setting up figures of those respecting whose being you are in doubt,—in framing, by a vain imitation, forms of what you do not believe to exist?" The folly of supposing that their gods could not hear them but by means of an image, and the absurdity of making a likeness of what no one ever pretended to have seen, are then set forth; and it is at last justly asked: "What can be done more injurious, more insulting, or more stupid than to know one *god*, and actually to pray to quite another *thing*,—to hope for help from a divine being, and yet to seek it from a senseless figure!" And other authors ridicule these sacred places, these groves and chapels, those temples with fine gates and porches, and with many wondrous and great ceremonies, in which, when once you had entered, nothing was to be seen but the image per-

haps of some beast,—an image in whose mouth birds would build their nests, or spiders weave their webs ; and this poor helpless idol was the object of all their prayers and worship! Such persons as adorn the outward, but neglect the inward man, are compared to those Egyptain temples, which presented every kind of outward decoration, but which contained within them nothing except a cat, a crocodile, or some such miserable specimen of the animals then commonly worshipped in Egypt. Another writer asks, in his lively way, when it is that the wood, or stone, or silver, of which the images were made, becomes divine. “You cast it, you frame it, you carve it; but it is not yet a god. Behold, it is soldered with lead, it is put together, and set up; but it is not yet a god. Lo, it is adorned, it is consecrated, it is prayed to, and then at last it becomes one!” Another author boldly confesses, that with regard to all esteemed by the heathens to be gods the Christians were atheists, or, in other words, did not believe in them; but then they were not so, he adds, in respect of the true God, the parent and fountain of wisdom and righteousness, in whom they did believe. And he shows that the Christians need not care for this charge, since some of the best men long before their times, being unwilling to join in a false worship, had shared the same reproach. Some notion of the hatred borne on this account to the Christian religion may be formed from the following recorded fact.

During a most furious persecution in Sicily (A. D. 304), a deacon named Euplius, coming close to the court of judgment, exclaimed that he was a Christian, and longed to die for Christ's sake. Upon this he was brought before the judge, with the gospels in his hand, which the Emperor had forbidden any one to have. After a few questions respecting them, being commanded to read a portion of them, he chose the words of our Saviour; "Blessed are they that are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven," and "whosoever will come after me, let him take up his cross, and follow me." "What is the meaning of this?" asked his heathen judge. "It is the law of my Lord which I have received," was the answer of Euplius. "From whom?" was the next question. No sooner had he replied, "From Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God," than he was condemned to the torture. When about to undergo this cruel sentence he was again questioned, particularly as to his refusing to give up those works (the gospels) which had been forbidden by the Emperor. The reason he gave for his conduct was his being a Christian, to whom it was not allowed to do so, nay, to whom it was better to die than deliver them up. "In them is everlasting life," said he. "The man who betrays them loses this, and for fear of such a loss I give up my life." He was then put to the torture, in the midst of which he cried out, "Thanks to Thee, Christ; oh, keep me,—for Thy

name's sake am I suffering!" His judge then said, "Cease this madness, Euplius, worship the gods, and you shall be set free." "I worship Christ," was the reply; "devils I abhor. Do with me as you please. I am a Christian. Long have I wished for these trials. Do what you will, add fresh torments; still I am a Christian." After a long time, when the torture was at an end, and Euplius had been again advised to offer sacrifice, he firmly replied, "I adore the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; I adore the Holy Trinity, beside whom there is no God. The gods that have not made the heavens and the earth and all that is therein shall perish. I am a Christian." After some other conversation Euplius became too feeble to speak much, and sentence of death was then passed upon him. The gospels were hung round his neck and he was led to execution, praying and praising God as he went, while a crier walked before him proclaiming, "This is Euplius, the Christian, the enemy of the gods and the emperors."

The accusation of Euplius, as the enemy of the emperors, may remind us of another reason for the hatred so unmercifully shown against the Christians on so many occasions by their heathen rulers. It was a very false, but a very common notion that the members of the early Church were undutiful subjects, by no means willing to obey the powers that were set over them. So far beyond decency or reason had the heathens gone in their pretended respect for their

emperors, (whom they were nevertheless frequently fighting against and murdering,) that it was customary to pay them divine worship, and to swear by their name. These things no Christians could consent to do, and therefore, though they were amongst the most quiet and peaceful of his subjects, they were reproached with being enemies to the emperor. Referring to our Saviour's command to render unto Caesar and unto God what is their own, one of the early defenders of our religion says, "For this reason we worship none but God; but in other respects we willingly serve you, whom we confess to be governors and emperors of men." And another says, "If the emperor bids me pay taxes, I am ready to do so; if my master commands me to serve and obey him, I own myself bound to do it; we must honour man as befits the nature of man, but it is God alone that is to be feared." A third writer bids their judges go on destroying them, saying that they did but force these souls out of their bodies, which were praying for the emperor's happiness, even while treated in this way by his officers. When the heathens heard of a kingdom of which all Christians were subjects, it was no easy matter to make them understand that it was not a kingdom of this world; and hence might arise some of the jealousy and suspicion of their unbelieving rulers. Another cause of such feelings might be the extreme unwillingness to serve as soldiers, which was sometimes shown by the most

zealous Christians, although, generally speaking, they made no objection to this duty, as we find from the numbers that were in the army. Indeed so far was this unwillingness sometimes carried that it led them into blameable conduct, and two persons suffered death in Africa rather than serve under a heathen emperor.

But one of the strongest objections made against Christianity, was its being a *new* religion. There are in the present day, and always have been in the world, two very great but very opposite mistakes, agreeing only in this, that both are extremely common. Some persons think that it is enough to condemn almost any thing, however good in itself, if they can but prove it to be new, while they are ready to defend all that has age in its favour, however worthless it may be. Others, on the contrary, (and their's is the prevailing error of the present times,) regard not the excellence of what is old, or the absurdity of what is new; with them novelty has charms to recommend, whilst age has deformities to disgrace, any thing whatsoever. The truly wise man, meanwhile, without troubling himself greatly about what is new or what is old, will seek only to separate the good from the bad, and to distinguish truth from falsehood. Such was the kind of wisdom practised and recommended by the early believers. Sure as they were of the strength and truth of their cause, all that they desired of their enemies was, that these should be allowed to have

their full weight, instead of being cried down and kept out of sight, merely because Christianity had but lately appeared in the world. "You tell us," was the homely, but forcible argument used by one of them against his opposers, "that we are wrong in doing away with customs handed down to us from our fathers. If we may not improve at all, why do we not still live on milk, our first food, to which from our birth our nurses have accustomed us? what right have we to add to or lessen our father's property, instead of preserving it just the same as we received it from him? why, in short, do we not still continue in our parents' arms,—why do we not still indulge in the same childish gambols as when we were infants at the breast?" Nothing could serve better to show the folly of those who clung to their false gods, merely because they had been so taught from their childhood, than questions like these. It was well said that "Old age, when ashamed to reform, has true cause to blush; it is not multitude of years, but the goodness of manners that makes gray hairs worthy of praise and honour: no age is too late to learn, nor is it ever any shame to grow better." And elsewhere the point is argued thus: "Our way of religion, you say, is new, and yours ancient; and what does this either hurt our cause or help yours? If ours be new, it will in time become old;—is yours old? there was a time when it was yet new. The goodness and authority of any religion is not to be

valued by the length of time, but by the excellence of its worship; nor does it become us so much to consider when it began, as what it is we worship." Besides, if that were all, it was urged the belief of the Christians in one Almighty God was by far the oldest of the two*, as might be proved from history. "Is there any thing older than He? or can any thing be found that is before Him, either in time or in Name?" Nevertheless, so great was the force of this charge of novelty upon the minds of the generality of men, that they were in the habit of tracing every evil and calamity of a public nature to the anger of the gods, on account of the increasing number of Christians among them. This charge against our faith furnishes a striking and curious proof of the folly and injustice, into which men may be led by giving way to a habit common enough in all ages and nations, the habit of complaining of the present times, and looking back to the past, as if they had been free from all evils and misfortunes. There are remaining at this day, works of some size written solely to prove that the earthquakes, tempests, famines, plagues, wars, and other calamities, which had befallen the world since the rise of Christianity, could not have been caused by that event, as such

* In like manner do the Roman Catholics accuse the Church of England of leaving the old way to follow one that is new; when, in truth, an inquiry into the belief of the early Christians shows that we have but returned to those old paths, which the Church of Rome has long ago forsaken.

things had raged as commonly, and as destructively, long before the coming of Christ, even in the most flourishing state of heathenism. But, unreasonable as it was, it was notwithstanding a convenient thing to have a patient harmless body of men, such as were the early disciples of the meek Saviour of the world, always at hand to bear the weight of the people's anger and discontent. Instead of exposing themselves to the storm, the rulers were glad to turn its fury in any other direction; and so, when the Roman people were enjoying their darling, but bloody and cruel sports in the theatre, and beholding miserable men fighting there either with wild beasts, or with their fellow-creatures, if at any time the favourite cry of "Away with the Christians, let the Christians be thrown to the lions!" was uttered, it was usually complied with by the magistrates. The poor disciple of Christ was led forth from prison, and cast, naked and unarmed, perhaps bound hand and foot, to some hungry beast, whose savage yells at the sight of his helpless prey would make themselves heard, even amidst the shouts of the applauding multitude. "They raise their voice," says one who lived in those times, "against the blood of the innocent, making in defence of their hatred this vain excuse, that they consider the Christians to be the cause of all public misfortunes and inconveniences. If at Rome the Tiber overflows its banks, if in Egypt the Nile does not

cover the fields*, if the heavens are at a stand still, if the earth is shaken, if famine, if disease prevails, the cry directly is, 'Away with the Christians to the lions!'" The same author elsewhere says: "We Christians ought to hate those meetings and assemblies of the gentiles, because there the name of God is blasphemed, and the *daily* lions called for against us; thence issue the decrees for our persecution, and thence do our temptations proceed."

Nothing is more likely to increase the feeling of hatred in the heart of man than for the objects of his dislike to be at the same time objects of his scorn, and yet successful in the world. This was another reason for the bitterness felt by the heathens against the first Christians. They saw a set of men, upon whom they looked down with utter contempt, daily increasing both in numbers and power; they saw not uncommonly even the wise and the great ones of this world embracing opinions which they affected to consider as little short of madness; they beheld the humble churches of the Christians thronged with numerous attendants, while the splendid temples of their own false gods were sometimes, in spite of all that law or custom could do for them, left almost deserted, without an offering or a worshipper. To

* It is well known that, as there is little or no rain in Egypt, the inhabitants of that country depend for their crops upon the overflowing of the river Nile, which, taking place regularly every Summer, renders the fields fruitful in the highest degree.

be baffled is a thing that will always awaken anger in the human breast; and the heathens had never been taught at all to check such feelings. To see himself baffled, to see his darling form of worship falling into neglect, and the idols he so blindly served sinking fast into contempt before the poor, forlorn, despised outcasts of society, before the persecuted Christians; this was more than the proud idolater could endure. The law and the governors of the state were still upon his side, and as long as they continued so, every thing that could be done by unlimited power, at the bidding of the deepest hatred and the bitterest scorn, was done against the unfortunate Christians. Their very name was an object of dislike; and Julian, the last heathen emperor, made a law, forbidding them to be called anything but Galilæans, the title he always gave them himself. So truly were they hated of all men for Christ's name-sake that it was common to hear persons saying, "Such a one is a good man, only he is a Christian;" or, "I wonder at such a one, a wise man, but lately turned Christian." Nothing, however, could make the believer cease to glory in that name. We read of one Attalus, a person of some note, who, to please the mob, was paraded about the theatre, while before him was carried a board on which was written, "This is Attalus the Christian." The only account that another person, who had been put to the most dreadful torture, would give of himself was this:—

"I am a Christian ; that is name, country, kindred, and every thing to me." Many reasons for the scorn so unmercifully bestowed upon the early believers might easily be given. They were, especially at first, generally persons of humble rank, poor in earthly goods, and of little or no education. And then their good qualities, their virtues themselves, instead of commanding respect from their dazzling showy character, were of such a kind as rather to raise the contempt of their proud enemies. To be humble and meek, to be patient and forgiving, to be heavenly-minded and pure in heart, were looked upon only as marks of meanness of spirit and folly. And thus, what with the attack made upon the old forms of idolatry by a religion but lately sprung up ; what with the jealousy felt by the emperors at the want of attachment of their Christian subjects, and the grudge borne by the rabble against these, as being the cause of all misfortunes ; what with the novelty and earthly weakness of the Gospel doctrine, and the rapid manner in which, in spite of all checks, it spread over every land and in every order of society, we can see abundant reasons for the hatred it met with from all who still remained attached to the old forms of heathen worship.

Many other causes might be pointed out, but enough has been said on this subject. It may be well, however, to repeat one observation which has been already made. The ill-will felt by the

author of evil against all that is good, and the natural dislike of corrupt human nature to the Gospel of Christ, must not be lost sight of, when we are endeavouring to account for the hatred shown by the heathens to the first believers. That hatred, fiercely as it burnt in their hearts, and destructively as it blazed forth in their actions, was nothing more than might have been expected from such men under such circumstances. But the manner in which these fiery trials of mortal enmity were endured and welcomed by the harmless objects of their fury, the boldness and courage, the meekness and tenderness of the Christians, were not to be expected from mere men, nor could these virtues ever have been manifested, as they were, by human strength alone. In the conduct of the heathen persecutors we behold but the vices and crimes of this lower world ; in that of the Christian sufferers he must be indeed blind who cannot trace a strength not their own, a power coming from above.

CHAPTER II.

IGNORANCE OF HEATHENS RESPECTING
CHRISTIANS.

IF men were always in the habit of acting as becomes reasonable beings, we should rarely meet with instances of the fiercest hatred against particular persons, joined at the same time with the most lamentable want of information respecting their views and practices. But as men, though blessed with reason, are very apt to suffer their judgments to be blinded by their feelings and prejudices, it is no uncommon thing, either in the history of the past, or in the conduct of those around us, to see the greatest enmity accompanying the deepest ignorance. Such was the case of the heathens with respect to the first professors of our faith. Their want of correct knowledge of the belief and practice of those whom they so barbarously treated, was in a great degree owing to those feelings of scorn and hatred, which kept them from ever making inquiry into the matter of fact, and led them to give willing credit to every idle tale that might reach their ears, so long as it was to the disadvantage of the Christians. The wonders done by our Lord had been too lately performed to be denied altogether ; so heathen ignorance contrived to save itself the trouble of inquiring after the truth by laying them to

the account of magical arts. "Where," said his judge to a bishop brought before him, as being a believer in Christ, "where are the magicians, companions of your art, or teachers of this crafty deceit?" A very little consideration might have shown them that they were altogether mistaken; that nothing but power from above could work such miracles, in such a manner, and so often, as Christ did; besides that He gave the same, and even greater, powers to the poor uneducated men chosen by Him as His Apostles. "To do what you are of yourself able to do," says a Christian writer, "and what is suitable to your strength and power, is nothing very wonderful; but to transfer this to another, and to give to a weak mortal to do what you alone were able to do, and make him to share in such authority; this belongs to a Power that is above all, that has beneath it the causes of all things." One chief reason of the ignorance of the heathens respecting the Christians was their continuing for a long time to confound them with the Jews,—a strong proof of their carelessness about the matter of fact, and their unwillingness to inquire into the truth! The Jews, owing to their religious belief in only one God, and their strict separation of themselves from all other nations, were always objects of dislike and contempt among their heathen neighbours or conquerors. And when Christianity came forth from the land of Judæa, the same feelings were also awakened against its professors; the

same falsehoods were solemnly told and greedily believed respecting it, as had before been current against the Jewish worship.

A heathen writer, in his account of the Jews, says, that "during their wanderings in the wilderness, on their journey from Egypt, they were lying down nearly ready to perish with weariness and thirst, when suddenly they beheld a troop of wild asses, returning from pasture, climbing up a bank covered with trees. Moses, the leader of the Jews, guessing from the abundance of grass that water was near at hand, followed these animals, which led him to a plentiful spring." He then goes on to state, that in consequence of this adventure the Jews have a figure of an ass, as an object of worship, in the most holy part of their temple; although directly afterwards he tells us that they suffer no images whatever to be in their cities and temples. From this story is supposed to have arisen an absurd charge against the Christians, that they were in the habit of worshipping the head of an ass! But this, though it serves as an example of heathen malice and ignorance, never seems to have gained any great credit. However, the first converts to the Gospel of Christ suffered much from their being confounded with those who still clung to the law of Moses. They were reproached, both by Jews and heathens, for not observing that law in all its strictness; and were called false Hebrews, who had forsaken the ways of their fathers. Julian, the heathen emperor, in mockery,

asks them why they had despised the gods, and embraced the religion of the Jews. "Was it," he adds, "because the gods had given empire to Rome, whilst, except for a very short time, they had held the Jews in continual subjection to other nations?" The writer already mentioned, speaking of the rise of the Christians, whom he calls a body of men *hated for their crimes*, says that Judæa was the beginning of this *plague*; and then, confounding the followers of Moses with those of Christ, he talks of the *enmity against all mankind* indulged by these last. Another author calls them "a race of men holding a new and mischievous superstition." A third, who was governor of a province (A.D. 110,) complains of "their perverseness and unbending obstinacy," their "madness," their "depraved and immoderate superstition;" whilst at the same time he owns that all the harm he could find in them amounted only to this:—"They used to meet on a certain day before the light," (through fear, it is most likely, of their heathen persecutors,) "and sing by turns a hymn to Christ as to a God; they bound themselves to avoid sin, to commit no theft, nor robbery, nor adultery; to betray no trust, but to keep their promises. After this they separated, and again met to eat food together, but in a harmless manner," which, however, at the governor's command they ceased to do*. These three authors were all

* The writer of this account (Pliny) bore no particular ill-will against the Christians; indeed he is thought to have been rather

heathens, who had ample means of knowing the truth, and were none of them wanting in curiosity and love of inquiry ; they lived, too, within a hundred years of Christ's death ; they bear witness to the great numbers who, in their time, were believers ; and yet what miserable, scanty, and unfair accounts do they give of our Holy Faith !

But unhappily, not content with misunderstanding and misrepresenting the Christians, the heathens, stung with the just reproaches of vice and immorality uttered against them by the believers in the Gospel, tried to throw back upon their accusers the same, or even worse, charges. The poor persecuted Church was driven to hold its meetings for divine worship as secretly as possible ; very often either early in the morning, or late at night. The very persons who forced them to do this, were the first to make it a handle of reproach against them ; and accordingly crimes were attributed to those men, whose outward lives were too pure to be attacked, and in whose sacred Scriptures might have been found (if the heathens instead of burning them would have condescended to read them), not only the most severe threats against open impurity of conduct, but a check

favourable to them than otherwise. But so little was then thought of the greatest cruelty committed against the most innocent persons and most helpless sex, that he put to torture two deaconesses (most likely of the rank of servants), to discover from these poor women something further concerning the customs of the Church of which they were members.

put upon the very thoughts of the heart, and even the appearance of evil forbidden. Among other horrid crimes it was charged upon the early believers that in their secret meetings they were in the habit of eating human flesh and blood. This might arise from some mistake with regard to the Lord's Supper, in which they ate and drank spiritually the body and blood of Christ. But supposing it to have arisen out of this, what could be a stronger proof of the ignorance of the heathens than their falling into such a mistake?

And here we may mention another very great error to which they gave way, in supposing, as they did, that to be a Christian it was needful to be weak and unlearned, or even of bad character, as if wisdom or a former good life hindered a man from sharing in the blessings of the Gospel. It was said that no one could be admitted to partake of these who was learned, or wise, or prudent, as among the faithful such things were reckoned evils. But "whoever is unlearned, or foolish, or imprudent, may boldly come and be admitted." And again it was said that the cry with the Christians was, "Do not examine but believe, and thy faith will save thee: the wisdom of this world is evil, but folly is good." And because to sinners is held out the hope of pardon in the Gospel, it was falsely accused by the heathens of giving encouragement to sin. Loose as they were in their morals, and corrupt in their mode of living, the heathens must have had no small share either of

assurance or else of blindness, to bring such a charge as this against the strict and holy Christians.

Nothing told more strongly against the cause of the first Christians, in the ignorant judgment of unbelievers, especially of the common people, than the sufferings, which, according to their own showing, their Master had undergone during His life. Accustomed, as the wordly-minded pagan always was, to estimate the truth and value of any form of religion by its earthly success, and the present benefits that it seemed to bestow, he could not fail to give a very low place in his esteem to that of the despised and persecuted Christians. "Behold," it was proudly said against them, "threats, punishments, and tortures; *crosses*, not to be worshipped, but to suffer upon; and even *flames*, of which you talk, and tremble at the future prospect. Where is your God, who can help you in another life, but can do nothing for you in this present one? Do not the Romans without His help rule, and reign over, and enjoy the whole world? nay, are they not your masters also?" Thus would the heathens, as in the time of Joel (Joel ii. 17.) boast of their own power to do mischief, and of their own idols, by mocking the spiritual worshippers with such questions as these:—"Where is your God in whom you glory? of what good is your religion for which you are giving up your lives?"—"Oh, wonderful folly," said the self-satisfied unbeliever, "and madness scarcely to be credited! Present torments they

scorn, whilst of those that are future and uncertain they feel afraid ; and though fearful of dying after death, they do not in the mean time fear to die." Such conduct was superior to human nature, and could not be understood, much less practised, by the mere light of nature. The heathens, when they saw the Christians refusing to pay any respect whatever to their false gods, were too ignorant of the truth to be able at all to enter into the grounds of such a resolution. Every form of falsehood, from the Egyptian's worship of cats and monkeys to the so-called philosopher's worship of nothing at all, was freely permitted at Rome ; but as soon as the truth made its appearance there, a desperate attempt was made to strangle it in its infancy. The reason of this was plain. The man who already served many gods could, without the least difficulty, at any time, add fresh names to his list, or at least he would never think of quarrelling with those that chose different objects of worship from himself. But the Christian was a follower of the truth, and that compelled him to believe, and not only to believe himself, but also to make known to others, the fact that the way of the Gospel is the only right way, and that all other paths are paths of falsehood and error. The heathens could understand how men might feel inclined to add to the number of their gods*, but being without any

* In fact, several great men and emperors of the Romans are said to have placed Christ among their gods.

knowledge of Him, who is a jealous God, they were at a loss to discover why it should be thought wrong to serve others along with Him. Such a notion they considered obstinate and unsociable, and accordingly they severely punished those who held it. A bishop, named Dionysius, was brought before the magistrate, and commanded to forsake his religion, in the hope that others might be led by his example. After much had been said, "What in the world hinders you," asked the magistrate, "even supposing yours is a God, from adoring Him together with those who are by nature such? For you are commanded to honour those whom all know to be gods." The bishop calmly replied, "We worship no other God;" a reply that, to the heathen, through his gross ignorance and carelessness respecting the truth, seemed, no doubt, to arise only from a stupid obstinacy of will.

So great was the dislike felt by some to the Gospel, and so hard was it to make out a plausible charge against it, that, among other things, the language and grammar of the Scriptures were objected to, as not being always correct. This was well answered by the remark, that, so long as these contained the *truth*, it mattered not in what words it was clothed. It would be just as wise to refuse the wholesome berry, because it grows on a prickly bush, as to reject what is good in the Scriptures, because it happens to be expressed in homely and unpolished language. But in reality this was but a small portion of the objec-

tion, which, partly through ignorance, and partly through pride and malice, was brought against Christianity. The heathens were fond of speaking of the first converts to that faith, as a set of miserable, low, uneducated men, the very scum of society, without a single learned, or wise, or great character among them to keep their folly in countenance*. Although we are by no means bound to show that many wise, or mighty, or noble men were called to the knowledge of the truth, especially at first, still the ignorance of the unbelievers, whether real or pretended, as to the true state of the case is very absurd. And it becomes yet more so, when compared with their complaints of the numbers and consequence of the converts to "the new religion," as the profession of the Gospel was called. Indeed all such wretched sneers respecting the condition of the early Christians, (sneers, which, even if founded on truth, deserve to have no weight against their faith,) fall to the ground before the contrary witness borne by the decree of a persecuting, unbelieving emperor. In that law all Roman knights who should embrace Christianity, were ordered to be deprived of their dignity and spoiled of

* The following lines, supposed to refer to the evil spirits said to have been cast out by the Christians in those days, are worth noticing, not on their own account, but as a proof of the vileness and contempt in which believers were then held :—

"The loathsome conjurors speak; not what they say,
But what they *breathe*, drives spirits bad away!"

their goods ; and if they still clung to it, they were to be punished with death ; the matrons, or "honourable women," were to lose their property, and be banished ; while punishment was also provided for those dependants of Cæsar who might confess the faith. This decree, made about two hundred and fifty years after the birth of Christ, proves that at that time there were many believers in these high stations. Happily we have in our hands undeniable proofs of men of wisdom and learning having left the follies and blasphemies in which they had been brought up, and turned to the knowledge of the One True God. We have large and numerous works of such men still remaining, and by these we may see that good sense, and talents, and learning, as well as goodness and holiness of life, were from very early times on the side of the Gospel. And so too do we find from the accounts of those who suffered in this good cause. One of them, for instance, was asked by a certain person in the crowd, "why, as he was so full of learning and study, he could obstinately hurry on towards death." And another was reproached by his judge "for having forsaken the worship of the gods, who had bestowed upon him life itself, and so many gifts of an abundant wisdom." Thus have we proofs, from the mouths of unbelievers themselves, that, whatever they might affect to think, still there were some men of rank and talent among the early Christians. They were not all of that low miserable

description, which gainsayers would have us suppose them to have been.

From what has been said, then, it would seem that, ignorant as were the heathens respecting the believers who dwelt among them, their ignorance could by no means excuse their cruel conduct. They certainly did not see the true state of the case ; but why did they not ? Was it because they were blind ? Or was it not rather, because they chose to close their eyes against it ? From this cause sprang all their mistakes, their hardness of heart, their savage deeds of blood, their false and contrary statements. Obstinate in their own vices and follies, they found fault with the Christian steadfastness in a holy and wise cause. Impure in their own lives, they dared to accuse the believers in Christ of the same, or even worse, crimes than they themselves were in the habit of committing. Fond of novelty themselves, and for ever flying from one form of image-worship to another, they could at the same time, reproach the members of the Church of God with the novelty of their religion, and yet destroy them because they would not change or forsake it, or admit any other form to a share of their attention*. But, strange as their ignorance appears in all these

* The constancy and firmness of Christians in religious matters seems almost to have grown into a proverb. A medical writer among the heathens, speaking of party-opinions, says, that "a follower of Moses or Christ will sooner forsake his belief, than physicians or philosophers the sect to which they belong."

instances, the greatest proof of it appeared in their entire want of anything like spiritual hopes or feelings. All their thoughts and all their affections were of the earth, and therefore earthy. And this kind of brute ignorance no power of man could ever have put to flight. No efforts of reason—no struggles of the soul for the mastery over such bodily inclinations, could ever have succeeded by themselves. When the darkness of the heathen world was at length enlightened, it was by the power of Heaven. When God said, "Let there be light, there was light;" but not before. The heathens might, and did affect to despise the Christians. In words of mingled scorn and pity they might say,—“You, anxious and doubting, abstain from pleasures that are lawful. You visit no public spectacles, you are to be seen in no processions; no public feasts are favoured with your presence. And thus, pale, trembling creatures as you are, deserving only of pity, you neither enjoy this life, nor rise again to a life to come.” But while they looked down in this way upon what they thought the ignorant blindness of the believer, the ignorance and the blindness were all their own. And it was a happy change for them when they too began to feel “anxious and doubtful,” to forbear from what they had heretofore considered to be “lawful pleasures,” and to be willing to give up some of the outward enjoyments of life for the sake of present inward peace of mind, and a future reward of endless happiness.

CHAPTER III.

**MISCHIEF ARISING FROM THE FAULTS OF SOME
WHO WERE, OR AT LEAST WERE THOUGHT
TO BE, CHRISTIANS.**

HITHERTO in considering the chief causes of that violence and cruelty which the Gospel struggled against in its first beginnings, we have looked only to those which arose from the faults and mistakes of its open enemies. But besides the hatred felt by the heathens against a system in every respect so much better than their own ; besides, too, their ignorance with regard to the real state of the case, and their sad mistakes about the faith and practice of Christians, there were other reasons,—reasons much more painful for a believer to reflect upon,—which may help to account for the harsh treatment met with by the Gospel. Painful as it may be to consider that some of the hardships so nobly borne by the infant Church were occasioned by the ill-conduct of men calling themselves Christians, still truth forces us to confess that such was the fact. But if we give the subject ever so little thought, we shall find that, sad and humbling as it certainly is, still there is nothing in this to shake the faith of a real believer. Indeed, when he calls to mind the repeated warnings respecting false brethren in the New Testament, he will feel that,

instead of weakening, it is a great strengthening of our faith to find these warnings so shortly, so completely, so sadly fulfilled ;—to see that, even in the best and purest times of Christianity, there were amongst its professors false teachers, “by reason of whom the way of truth was evil spoken of.” (2 Peter ii. 2.) And when we remember that one of the twelve apostles, chosen by Christ himself, was “a devil,” we can neither wonder nor complain at finding like characters among their first successors.

It is not to our present purpose to attempt to follow those who by their lives and doctrines disgraced the Gospel, through all the by-ways of error into which they strayed. Very little remains of their writings, so that it is not always easy to say what were their opinions ; but thus much we know for certain respecting them, that their errors were very great, great enough indeed to give a colour and excuse for some of the hateful charges which were (as we have already seen) abundantly brought against the early Christians. Simon, called Magus, or the magician, of whom we read in the Acts of the Apostles, (chap. viii.) is said to have been the father of the heresies and corruptions that sprang up in the Church, though he, like most of his followers, did not in truth deserve the name of Christian. His very title, the Magician, will serve to explain one of the charges brought against the first believers ; and we find that his scholars were in the habit of practising magical arts. A few specimens of

the notions of these men, who, with the empty name of Christians, and a bare confession of the chief facts of the New Testament, mingled all kinds of strange and impious fancies, may help to throw some light upon the disgrace and mischief brought by these persons upon the true faith. "Certain men," according to one who lived within two hundred years of the birth of Christ, "think it right to have wives in common, and from these great injury has arisen to the Christian name." Another writer says that, "Simon himself considered no works *good by nature*, but *accidentally*;" and his followers held the same falsehood, saying, that "works were good and evil only by human opinion." Elsewhere their character is summed up in a few words;—"They say that God is not to be feared, and therefore all things are free for them, and without restraint." And a writer still earlier than any of these, speaks of certain men in his day who said, (forgetful of David's sin, which, full as he was of Divine knowledge, was not forgiven without deep repentance,) that "though they are sinners, so long as they *know* God*, the Lord will not impute sin to them." It seems that the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, who, we are sure, were "hated of God," (Rev. ii. 15,) allowed of great impurity of conduct. Indeed, without going

* The name adopted by most of these (so called) Christians was that of Gnostics, or "men of knowledge." The stir raised by them about their *knowledge* and their *freedom*, compared with their wretched practices, may remind us of some persons in the present day.

any deeper into a subject at once so unprofitable and so painful, without describing the bad practices or wild opinions of these men any further, we may be allowed to observe how lofty, in the midst of all their vice and folly, were their claims. They, forsooth, of all men were the most spiritual,—therefore it mattered not what they did after the flesh ; they alone were perfect in knowledge,—they only knew and enjoyed true liberty. Such were their proud boastings ; and even in the very midst of their sins and impurities they dared to use, or rather misuse, the words of Scripture. To the pure they boasted that all things were pure, to *them* all things were lawful*. From such examples as these, we may learn never hastily to give credit to the mighty claims which vain pretenders to religion often make, even in our own times. In nine cases out of ten, the smallness of their real worth, is just in proportion to the greatness of their pretensions.

* Such wicked notions were not openly held by all the Gnostics. Some of them even went into the other extreme, and led very strict lives, forbidding marriage, and encouraging self-denial. However, if this was not a mere cloak for secret indulgence, (as charity leads us to hope it was not,) their opinions, into which we cannot now enter, were such as no one could hold and deserve to be called a Christian. As to men agreeing in the same notions going into such opposite extremes in practice, that may be easily explained. All alike considered the body to be the source of evil ; those of a self-denying and severe temper would mortify it as such, while those who were fond of pleasure, would affect to despise it, and let it act as it pleased, as if it had nothing to do with their souls,—souls full (as they boasted,) of knowledge, and liberty, and perfection.

One thing may, perhaps, need a little explanation before we consider the effect produced among the heathens by such vile conduct on the part of men calling themselves Christians. Why, we may ask, since they were not owned by the Church, nor were indeed Christians any further than a mere receiving of the New Testament could make them so ; why should they have taken upon them this name, a name of which they proved themselves so unworthy ? It is most likely that this was done because the Christian was an increasing and flourishing religion ; and also because its truths were such as to command the belief of all who made any inquiry into them. And thus many men, convinced to a certain point, and yet loth to forsake the self-indulgence allowed among heathens, were tempted to assume the empty name of Christians, while they still clung fast to their old vices and follies. And as these did not, like the real soldier of Christ, scruple to eat meat offered to idols ; as idolatry, and forsaking their faith (if they could be said to forsake what they never had), were, like all other things with them, things indifferent, which they might do or not as it suited them, this *liberty* was a great recommendation in the eyes of the timid, wavering, half-heathen, half-Christian convert. " You ask," said a martyr to his persecutors, " why many of us take part in your sacrifices without scruple ; for whose compliance you laugh to scorn the few amongst us who refuse. But picture to yourself a

barn-floor full after the threshing. Which makes the greater heap,—the chaff or the wheat? When the labourer turns the wheat with his fork the heavy solid grain still continues in the same place, while the chaff, having no weight, becomes the sport of the winds. And again, when men cast a net into the sea, can all they bring up be the best*? So are those you see, and such is the manner in which the good and bad are mixed together, but as soon as you treat them alike, the difference between them appears, and that which is best is shown by the comparison."

Nor was it only for the sins and follies of every wild and lawless sect choosing to lay claim to the name of Christian that the early Church was 'most unjustly made answerable. As we have already seen, the heathens, in their deplorable want of information respecting the truth, for a long time confounded the Jews and the Christians together. So that these last were reproached with the crimes and follies of a nation known and hated all over the world, a nation at that time smarting under the severest judgments of Heaven, and driven into a state of madness by repeated misfortunes, by the utter ruin of every object that was dear to them, and the total disappointment of every darling expectation of their hearts. They were then suffering every kind of misfortune, not undeservedly, even according to the confession of Josephus, himself a Jew, who declares his belief that

* See Matt. xiii. 47.

“ if the Romans had not destroyed them as a people, their city would have been drowned, or swallowed up by an earthquake, or, like Sodom, overthrown by fire from Heaven, so great was the wickedness of its inhabitants.” It was bad enough, therefore, to be mistaken for a Jewish sect; but this was not all that the Christians had to endure owing to their connexion with the Jews, who, soon after our Lord had arisen from the dead, had sent messengers all over the known world to proclaim that the religion of Christ was a God-denying and lawless heresy. The Gentile world, it is most likely, took it for granted that this charge was not made without good reason by those whom they judged to be well acquainted with the Christians; and the unwillingness of believers to offer up worship to any of their gods, as well as the absence of images or other objects of sight in the Christian service, must have strengthened their opinion. So that, what with the disgrace brought upon the Church by false pretenders to the Christian name, and what with the falsehoods spread abroad against it by those unbelieving Jews, who were thought to know its doctrines well, we may fairly make some allowance for the conduct of the heathens, inasmuch as they undoubtedly were, to a certain extent, deceived and misled, so as to form a mistaken notion of the religion which they persecuted. But when many Defences of the Christian faith had been published, and addressed to these for the purpose of

undeceiving them and opening their eyes to the truth, we can no longer make any allowance for them on this account. Nothing, indeed, can at all excuse the fierceness and cruelty of the later and more violent persecutions.

Thus when we take into account the bad lives of some pretended Christians, the low and unfavourable callings of the apostles, and the great, but often misunderstood doctrine of Christ's taking upon himself the sins of mankind, we may see how natural in the mouths of the heathen it was to speak with scorn of fishermen and publicans* disputing about religion, to talk as if all who were Christians had formerly been the greatest sinners†, nay, to accuse them of still remaining such upon the strength of their expected pardon. And now that we have seen what was the character of certain of the first heretics and false professors, we may be better prepared for some account of the way in which they were treated by the apostles and other fathers of the Church ; a way that might seem harsh and uncharitable, did we not know the evil of their principles, and the mischiefs to the real believer arising from this. There is an account

* The publicans, or tax-gatherers, were greatly hated in the times of which we are treating. "A certain person," says a heathen writer, "being asked what were the very worst of wild beasts, replied, that among the mountains *bears* and *lions* were the worst ; but in cities, *publicans* and *flatterers*."

† St. Paul's words (1 Cor. vi. 11.) were brought to prove that *all* had been such, though he mentions only *some*.

respecting St. Peter and Simon Magus, which, though its truth has been doubted, may be mentioned. It is said that when St. Peter had raised a person from the dead, whom Simon had in vain tried to restore by his magical arts, the apostle begged the crowd, who were going to fall upon Simon to stone him, to spare his life, as it would be punishment enough for him to live, and see, in spite of all his power and malice, the kingdom of Christ increasing and flourishing. There is a much better supported fact respecting St. John's conduct, related by one who had himself seen persons that had conversed with this apostle in his old age. St. John being at Ephesus was going to bathe, but seeing Cerinthus, a noted heretic, in the place, he hurried away without bathing, saying as he went, "Let us make haste, for fear the building should fall on our heads, while Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is in it." In like manner, and perhaps after the example of his master, did Polycarp, a disciple of St. John, and Bishop of Smyrna, behave towards Marcion, a heretic, and a man of otherwise bad character. Having by chance met him in the street, Marcion, who it seems had formerly known him, asked to be owned by him as his acquaintance; "I own thee to be the first-born of Satan," was the rebuke of the indignant Christian*. The same Poly-

* A few specimens of the falsehoods held by Cerinthus and Marcion may serve to clear St. John and his scholar from any charge of want of charity in their language. These heretics

carp, when any wild and impious doctrines were told him as having been lately started, would stop his ears, and lament that he had been spared to live to hear such things. This might have been partly owing to the natural feeling of old age, which is to praise the days that are gone by, and prefer them to those that are present. But in truth, when such men as Polycarp, men who were always ready to lay down, and at last did lay down, their lives for the sake of the Gospel, saw false teachers spreading*, in the name of Christianity, the most absurd and wicked doctrines, we cannot be surprised at their feeling and acting as they did. We cannot wonder at their setting their faces as a flint against the men whose days and talents were devoted to the work of injuring and undermining that Church, in support of which these holy martyrs were willing to spend, to endure, to sacrifice all things. They had to defend their faith from being confounded with the faith, if such it might be called, of some who especially regarded the characters of *Cain*, *Esau*, *Korah*, and *Judas Iscariot*, as deserving of respect, and honoured the *serpent*, as

held, among other things, that the God of the Old Testament was not the true God; Marcion said that Christ never really suffered death; and Cerinthus taught that *Jesus* was one person, a mere man, and *Christ* another person, a divine being! This last falsehood may serve to throw light upon the meaning of 1 John ii. 22, and v. 1.

* One of the fathers says that wasps make *nives*, but there is no *honey* in them; so heretics make *churches*, but there is no *truth* in them.

the author of the knowledge of good and evil to mankind. And it was in all likelihood a greater trial to these fathers of the Holy Catholic, or Universal Church, to have to defend their belief from being mistaken for the wild visions of such "filthy dreamers," than it was to withstand the fire and sword of their heathen enemies. However, such trials are to be expected by Christians in all ages. In the present day there are various most important errors of doctrine, agreeing only in this, that they all shelter themselves under the name of Christianity. And besides this, another evil, to which the early Church was a stranger, prevails amongst us. There are numberless persons who, without professing to hold a different doctrine, wantonly forsake the Church of Christ, as it was established by the apostles, for a form of church-government of their own devising, or for no form at all. And, meanwhile, there are abundance of unbelievers, who make such disputes among us an argument against our religion. These things are now our trials of faith. All we have to do is to endure unto the end, to cling to that body, the Church, of which Christ is the head, and we are the members; firmly at all times, but never harshly or uncharitably, to oppose those, who, for no reason, or for no good reason, would tear in sunder that body; and to comfort ourselves with the remembrance that such trials are what we must expect. "Behold, I have told you before," are our Lord's own words.

CHAPTER IV.

MARTYRDOM.

SINCE, during nearly three hundred years after the death of Christ, His quiet and unoffending disciples were always in a state of fear, and very often in actual danger of their lives, on account of their religion ; it is of great importance rightly to understand the trials of all kinds which they overcame so gloriously by enduring so patiently. The Church, then young, and, as it were, newly planted, may truly be said to have been watered by the blood of its saints. Under this nourishment, a kind of nourishment that must have certainly killed it, had it not been planted by the hand of the Almighty, it thrived beyond measure*. From a beginning that to the eye of man could promise nothing, from a seed that appeared to be indeed "the least of all seeds," the Christian Church gradually and yet rapidly became a tree, and "shot out great branches" to the east and to the west, to the north and to the south, so as to cover, more or less completely, with its blessed shelter, nearly all the world.

* As an example of the means by which the infant Church was in vain opposed, we may point to the fate of a certain place in Phrygia, which is said to have been surrounded with soldiers, and destroyed by fire, together with all its inhabitants of every rank, sex, and age, merely because they were Christians, and would not sacrifice to the false gods of the heathens.

In the former chapters we have taken a brief view of the chief causes by which the heathens were led to act as they did towards the afflicted, but not unhappy Christians. In the present chapter it is proposed to consider the conduct of these professors of our holy faith in the midst of all their unmerited sufferings. But before we do this, it may be well to recall to mind the great difference between their trials, and any which we have ever been compelled to undergo. We may often hear persons complaining of the want of freedom in this, our native land, and crying out for more liberty than the laws allow them. It is not now to our purpose to inquire whether or no we have in England as much freedom as man can well enjoy, without doing away altogether with the protection of the law for himself and his property. But it is suitable to the present subject to compare the sufferings of the early believers under the Roman government, with what any one can possibly suffer at present in this country. Now a man may worship God exactly as he pleases, or, if he pleases, not at all; so long as he forbears from disturbing or offending the feelings of others, he may in England do just what he likes in this respect. Then, if a Christian did but open his mouth in prayer to his Creator, if he ventured to shrink back from the services of a form of worship he condemned, if his lips refused to blaspheme and deny the Saviour, who, as he verily believed, had died in his stead, "Away with him to the lions!" was the cry of a

savage brutal mob ; or, " Let him be tortured and executed," was the cruel doom of his heathen judge. Living, then, as we do, in a country where little or no check is put even upon the worst and vilest notions, until they ripen into actual crime and outrage, we can hardly form an idea of the trials of the first Christians, who, for holding the best and holiest opinions in the least offensive way, were exposed to every suffering that could be endured on this side of the grave ; and then, when cruelty itself was at a loss for fresh torments, were cut off by a violent and untimely death. And this too, we must recollect, was borne by these good men, while they saw persons of the very worst lives, and of no religion at all, not merely escaping punishment, but even sitting in judgment to condemn them. Unless, therefore, we put ourselves in some measure into the place of the members of the early Christian Church, and bear always in mind these and the like circumstances which added so great a weight to their trials, we can scarcely do justice to the faith, the virtue, the courage, and the charity so generally exhibited in their conduct.

All those who were put to death during these unhappy times for refusing to forsake the religion of Christ, were called by the Church *Martyrs*, or *Witnesses*. This name was given them on account of the evidence afforded by their noble conduct to the truth of the Gospel. Sometimes, however, such persons were banished or otherwise punished, instead of being

put to death. And these, inasmuch as in the face of death itself, at the cost of honour, fortune, and all other earthly advantages, they had *confessed* their firm attachment to the Christian faith, were called *Confessors*. St. Stephen, therefore, was the first Christian martyr, and in one respect his example seems to have been generally copied. It was customary for those whose blood was about to be shed for the sake of the Gospel, to direct their prayers chiefly to Christ, the second person in the holy and undivided Trinity, the great Captain of their salvation, the first and greatest in glory, in sufferings, and in patience, of all those who have laid down their lives for the truth. St. Peter and St. John were the first confessors, as we find from the fourth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. For a time the infant Church, rapidly as it was increasing among the Jews, was too small to be noticed by the heathens, unless it was brought before their observation by the efforts of the unbelieving Israelites to put it down. Every one knows that St. Paul appealed from the judgment-seat of a governor "willing to do the Jews a pleasure," to the judgment-seat of the emperor, to Cæsar himself; and that he was accordingly carried to Rome. Nero, one of the vilest wretches that ever disgraced the shape of man, was the emperor to whom he appealed, and it was early in his reign that St. Paul arrived in Rome. The first general persecution of the Christians, a persecution spoken of by heathen writers, is said to have com-

menced from the wickedness of Nero. Somebody talking with this unfeeling monster, chanced to repeat a verse to this purpose :—

When I am dead, let fire confound the world.

“No, no,” said the emperor; “it shall be whilst *I* am living!” and seized with this strange fancy, he ordered the city of Rome to be set on fire in many places, pretending to dislike its narrow streets and old buildings. None dared to hinder the emperor’s servants, even when busy upon such an errand; and in a short time the fire made head so that nothing could afterwards stop it, and at last it destroyed the palace itself. Nero, meanwhile, enjoyed the grandeur of the sight, and, dressed as an actor, played upon his harp the destruction of Troy. After the fire, however, he did all he could to help those who had suffered from it; but his arts were in vain. Every one pointed to him as the wanton author of the universal distress; so that, being at a loss what to do, the wicked emperor resolved to lay the whole crime upon the Christians, who were then in great numbers at Rome, and by no means popular with the heathens. Accordingly persons were procured by whose witness a vast multitude were convicted, not so much of having set fire to the city, says the Pagan writer, as of hatred against the whole race of man. To their sufferings Nero added mockery: some were covered with the skins of wild beasts and baited to death by dogs; some were fixed to crosses, and others were burnt alive in

the most cruel manner, being made to serve as torches at night. The emperor lent his gardens for this horrid spectacle, and there gave public sports, mixing himself among the crowd, either in his chariot, or dressed as a coachman. So fierce was the cruelty practised on the Christians, that, little as the heathens liked them, they began at last to take pity on them. Such was the first persecution ever suffered by the Christians from the heathen government. In it many of the first believers, including, as it is said, St. Peter and St. Paul, perished. It is said that these two apostles suffered together; that St. Paul, as being a Roman citizen, was beheaded, while St. Peter was crucified, and that *with his head downwards*, at his own desire, as unworthy of being put to death in the same way with his Master.

After the death of Nero*, the faithful believers in Christ were for a short time left without disturbance. But for the next two hundred and fifty years they never were in a state of security in any part of the Roman empire, with regard either to their lives or property. A falsehood charged upon any of them, the crimes of one choosing to call himself a Christian, the savage fury of the multitude, or the uncertain humour of the emperor, could always raise against them in an instant a storm that would cost them their lives. During a space of two hundred and forty-five years, between

* For an account of the mode in which this bad man perished, see chap. ix.

the death of Nero and the triumph of Christianity by the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, no less than nine other general persecutions are considered to have taken place. But it seems hardly possible to say how many persecutions there were. Very few of them seem to have deserved to be called *general*, as they were mostly confined to particular places, and they often slumbered, as it were, a long time, without altogether ceasing. It would be painful and useless to enter at large into the various cruelties to which, in those days, almost every true Christian was likely, at some part or other of his life to be exposed; to be beaten with whips loaded with leaden balls; to be nailed to a cross, and there left as it might happen, to pine, to bleed, or starve to death; to be put upon the rack, and have their joints forced out of place by the strength of screws; to be fastened to a wheel (sometimes set with iron spikes) and have their naked bodies torn as they were whirled round by its rapid motion; to be burned alive by a slow fire; to be thrown to wild beasts; to be sent, after being deprived of an eye or a foot, to the mines to labour in the midst of cold, and filth, and starvation; these were the common penalties for being a Christian*. The sufferings that were less common were, if possible, yet more horrid. We may well ask ourselves, as we read of such things, whether, if we had

* Among these the insults commonly offered to female virtue must not be passed over.

lived in those days we could have been faithful unto death. But though, unaccustomed as we are to any such fierce trials of our faith, we naturally shrink even from the thought of them, we may be sure that we could have gone through them as well as the first martyrs, if, like them, we sought for help and strength where only such help and strength can be obtained. And, in one sense of the word, let us recollect that even now we may all be martyrs. "Whosoever," says one who lived in the early times of trial, "performs his Saviour's commandments is in every action a *martyr*, or *witness* to Him, by doing His will. And in consequence such persons, when they name the name of the Lord, by their deeds bear record of Him whose they believe themselves to be, and for whose sake they have crucified the flesh with its desires and passions."

But grievous as were the sufferings of the soldiers of Christ during their lives, these were not enough to satisfy the hatred of their destroyers, who, feeling themselves baffled and set at nought by the meekness, patience, and unconquerable fortitude of those Christian heroes*, did all that was in their power to show their spite against them, even after

* For a heathen to break down these noble feelings was reckoned no small victory. "I have seen," says an eye-witness of the persecution of the Christians, "a governor wonderfully excited with joy, (as much as if he had subdued a whole nation of barbarians,) because one, who had withstood all entreaties with great virtue for two years, was at last seen to give way and forsake his faith."

they had deprived them of life. "What fierceness, what savageness, what madness to refuse light to the living, and earth to the dead!" exclaimed a Christian author of those times. And to their refusal of a decent burial the heathens sometimes added the most unfeeling mockery of the dead. For example, we read of the bones of certain martyrs being mingled with the bones of camels and asses before they were thrown away, so that it was no easy matter to distinguish them, in order to pay them the last offices of respect and affection. And thus by every insult that could be offered to the lifeless bodies of the departed saints, did the hard-hearted unbelievers try to vex and terrify the living. And then they vainly boasted of the fact of their being allowed to do so, as a proof that the Christian's God was helpless and his religion untrue. Besides these, too, they had other modes as mean, if not as disgusting, of manifesting their spitefulness. When they found the Christians willing to pay for leave to copy the accounts of the death of their martyrs out of the public records, and perceived that the frequent reading of such histories in the Church, which was customary on the days sacred to their memory, served but to confirm the courage and inflame the zeal of the survivors, they did all they could to prevent these copies from being taken. They were unwilling, it may be, to make their own overthrow by Christian constancy more public, and add to the increasing spread of opinions so hateful in their

sight. But all was in vain. It was said by a bitter enemy, the Emperor Julian, that, "if you gave the Christians an opportunity, they would crowd as fast to martyrdom, as bees swarm to their hives." And one of the first defenders of our faith against the heathen compares the Church to a vine, which grows the faster the more it is pruned. "It is clear," says he, "that no beheading nor crucifying, no being cast to wild beasts, no chains, nor flames, nor any other kind of torments can make us forsake our religion; but the more we suffer, so much the more freely do other men become, through Christ's name, believers and devout."

Very great, as it may well be supposed, were the consideration and respect in which the memory of those was held, who had laid down their lives for the truth. The eyes of all were fixed upon their conduct, as furnishing a guide to direct the steps, and a witness to confirm the faith, of their brethren. No one could see a fellow-creature and fellow-believer meekly enduring all that his enemies were able, in their utmost stretch of malice, to put upon him without feeling an increased respect, not merely for the man himself, but also for the Faith that had kept him from sinking under such a trial. And, on the other hand, who could behold the savage conduct of the persecutors of that Faith without feeling at once the deepest pity and the greatest horror, not so much at the persons who did such acts, as at the religion,

(if such it might be called) which approved of them! The steadfastness of the martyrs was indeed an abiding subject of rejoicing to the early Church. When the Christians were accused of being a timid set of men, very fond of their bodies, it was truly answered; "We can as cheerfully put off our mortal flesh in the cause of our religion, as the philosopher can put off his cloak." And indeed Julian, the heathen emperor, compared the martyrs to grass, which, the more often it is cut down, the more thickly it springs up again. The heathens thought those no better than fools, who, when they might have escaped, preferred torture and death. "But they might see," it was argued, "that this, in which so many thousands all over the world agreed, was not such sad folly. Supposing women through the weakness of their sex to be deceived, (for they sometimes called Christianity a superstition fit only for women,) still surely the men are wise. If boys and youths are, through their want of experience, easily imposed upon, grown up and aged persons are not so. If one city acts absurdly, it cannot be that others without number would do the same. If one province or people are wanting in prudence, the others, at least, must be able to understand what is right. Now, as the heavenly law is received from the rising to the going down of the sun; as all sexes, ages, nations, and countries serve God with united minds; as there is everywhere to be seen the same patience and the same scorn of death, our enemies ought to

have understood that there must be some reason in the thing,—that it is not defended, even to death, without a cause. When the people see men torn in pieces by various kinds of torments preserving an unconquerable patience, though their very tormentors become weary, they think, (as is really the case,) that there is some meaning in the constancy of the sufferers and in the agreement of so many, since without God patience itself could not endure such pains. Robbers and stout-bodied men cannot do this; they cry out and groan; they are overpowered with pain, because they have no patience breathed into their souls from above. But our women and children, (to say nothing of the men,) in silence conquer their tormentors; nor can fire itself force from them a single groan. Behold a weak sex and a tender age enduring to have the whole body torn in pieces or burnt, not because they cannot avoid it, for they might if they would, but of their own free choice, because they trust in God." And after this strong appeal to the witness borne by the martyrs, the same writer asks, with a noble feeling of freedom and independence, "Who then is so insolent, so proud, as to forbid me to lift up my eyes towards Heaven? Who can force me to worship what I will not, or hinder me from worshipping what I will? What rights will be left us, if another's pleasure is to wring from us this which ought to be done of our own free will?"

Heathens professing themselves to be converts

were not admitted by baptism into the early Church without long preparation, except in very urgent cases. But if any person yet unbaptized had faith and courage enough to become a martyr for the truth, this was always considered to serve in the stead of baptism. Such persons were said to have been baptized with blood. "No one," it was said, "could be a member of Christ, but either by baptism in Christ, or death for Christ," and this last was called "the greatest and most glorious baptism of blood." As nothing could comfort or encourage the faithful more than the recollection of those, who, by losing their lives for the Gospel's sake, had gained eternal life, it was a very early custom to celebrate on a certain day in the year the memory of such holy men. Different persons were thus honoured in different places, each community of course preferring those who among themselves had suffered in the good cause, while some few of great fame were honoured in almost all places. The time chosen for these celebrations was commonly the day of the martyr's death. This was called "his birth-day," and was always kept with gladness and rejoicing. "We celebrate not," said one, "the day on which they were born, that being the inlet to sorrow and temptation, but on which they died, as the end of their miseries, and that which sets them beyond the reach of temptation," The place of meeting was generally the tomb of him whose virtues they celebrated. And so

assembling, they had all that time and place could do to fill their souls with admiration for these worthies, and strengthen them to follow their examples and copy their actions. The martyrs were commonly laid in the usual burial-places, which were not then, as in the present day, adjoining the churches, but mostly beyond the walls of the cities. In these places, which were frequently vaults or caverns, did the early Christians keep the feasts of their holy men, and often were they forced by the tyranny of their enemies to have their meetings at night. Their simple festival was quite of a religious nature. They had divine service, partook of the Lord's supper, and made a collection for the poor, after which, they listened to the acts and praises of the martyr in whose honour they had come together. Sometimes they had a kind of feast, when the service was over, in which all partook*; and this perhaps gave rise to some sort of markets or fairs, which were held on such days at the martyr's tomb. Such a custom was not approved of, and being sometimes abused, was at last alto-

* It is sad to carry our thoughts from these simple and religious feasts of the early Church, to the folly and nonsense with which in Roman Catholic countries such holy days are now kept; and to the drunkenness and idleness with which those that are observed at all, are kept in our own country. How many thousands of our fellow-subjects are there in London alone, who have no notion of any other mode of keeping even such times as Easter, and Christmas, and Whitsuntide, but by an extraordinary indulgence in drinking, and swearing, and such like *enjoyments*, as they are called!

gether laid aside. Indeed these festivals seem to have been appointed in some measure with a view to win the common people, many of whom loved the heathen form of worship more for its feasts and rioting than for any thing else. However, those who could be gained by such a motive were not worth converting, and, as might have been expected, only brought their bad habits along with them. Indeed, like most other things, these celebrations of martyrs, though good and well intended at first, became in time miserably abused. When their memory had grown still more venerable, not merely from age, but also from the change for the worse, which (especially in this respect) had taken place among Christians, evil practices began to creep into the Church. The time of suffering for Christ's sake had gone by, and too soon did the spirit that prompted men cheerfully to do this die away. And then those who had so nobly shown this spirit in earlier times began to be too much thought of,—to be looked up to as something more than human,—by their unworthy successors in the Faith, many of whom, having, perhaps, formerly been accustomed to serve false gods, would be more easily misled into an undue regard to the names of the Christian martyrs. And even among the better sort of Christians, increasing worldliness and decaying faith might find some encouragement, when they made their appearance in the shape of an extraordinary respect for the memory of such men as

had given their lives in defence of the truth. It was natural for the early Christians to keep with feelings of the utmost tenderness and zeal any little token of attachment, which had been left with them by their martyred friends. We are told, for instance, of one, who, in taking leave of the world drew a ring from his finger, and dipping it in his bleeding wounds, gave it to his friend, bidding him farewell, and urging him to be mindful of the faith he had shown, and to be strengthened, instead of troubled, by his sufferings*. And again it was excusable to preserve with care and respect, whenever this was practicable, the bones or other remains of those witnesses who had been slain for the truth. But in the course of time these relics or remains of saints became the cause of the grossest folly among Christians. Wonders were said and believed to be worked by such articles. The bones, the teeth, the hair, the dress of the martyrs, were made the objects of an idolatry scarcely less hateful in the sight of God than that of the heathen

* It was formerly the custom for every church to possess some relic of a saint. From this arose the high price of such articles, and the fraud common in selling them. In later times an abbey in France, having been plundered in war, sold the body of a saint without the head for 500*l.* a much larger sum *in value* than it now is. It was bought by a countryman of our own, and placed at Peterborough. At Croyland in Lincolnshire was some of the Virgin Mary's hair,—her girdle was shown, it is said, in seven different places. Even the coals, (or rather *ashes*, we may suppose,) that burned St. Laurence, and the ear of Malchus, were objects of reverence.

world. And whilst what remained of their mortal bodies upon earth was thus profaned, their pure and holy spirits were not less insulted, in another state of being, by the practice, still kept up in the Church of Rome, of praying to them in order to secure their prayers at the Throne of Heaven. From the absurd reverence paid to relics sprang, in all probability, that open worship of images, which has so long prevailed in the same Church. Relics were sometimes scarce, and what could answer in their stead so well as a picture of the admired saint? When this was once made, it gradually became to be more and more regarded, till at last that regard grew to be nothing less than idolatry. "He that made pictures of saints for memory, for history, for ornament, did little dream that the works of his hands should be worshipped; and that such worship should be decreed for an article of faith*;" but so it has come to pass, through the weakness and wickedness of men. However, it is not to our present purpose to follow this subject any further. We may only observe that nearly four hundred years after Christ (when such evil practices were merely so far beginning to creep in, as to give some excuse to the heathens then left, to compare the service of the martyrs with that of their own gods) it was asked in reply to such remarks; "Who ever has heard a Christian priest, even when standing before

* Sir Humphrey Lynde's *Via Tuta*, p. 45, ed. 1819.

an altar, raised to the honour and worship of God over the most sacred body of a martyr, saying, I offer sacrifice* to thee, Peter, or Paul, or Cyprian? No such thing; it is offered to God in memory of such men,—to God who made them, and enabled them to become martyrs, and has joined them in heavenly honour to His holy angels."

In almost every case of noble and praiseworthy conduct, there will be some who fall alike into error by going into opposite extremes. And so it was in the case of martyrdom. Some went too far, and almost thrust themselves into the way of persecution, whilst others of a more timid temper, and of a less steadfast faith, shrunk back from the hour of danger, and, rather than lose their lives, forsook their religion. These faults were faults into which none but the early Christians, or persons placed in like circumstances with them, could fall, and therefore they will be more fully considered in another place†. We have already seen how highly the memory of those who had fallen in the Christian warfare against the world and all the powers of darkness, was respected and cherished; but we must not suppose that the honour paid to them did not commence until after their deaths. No,—it was begun during their lives, and the deep

* We may remark that the *sacrifices* of which St. Austin speaks were of a *spiritual* kind. So, in the English Church, we offer, at the communion, "ourselves, our souls and bodies, as a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice."

† See Chapter VIII.

reverence with which both the words and actions of those in prisons or under torments were regarded by their fellow-Christians, must have in some measure softened the pains they endured. Indeed, this feeling seems to have been carried too far, and good as it was in itself, it became the cause of mischief to the Church, since it set up a new power that was sometimes opposed to the power of the bishops and clergy, the lawful guides of the Christian brotherhood. And, without wishing at all to lessen the glory of those, who at the risk of their lives confessed Christ before men, we must allow something for the effect which the hope of such favours from their brethren (in case their lives were spared,) must have had, even upon the quietest and most pure-minded Christians. Indeed, such hopes, rather than a truly holy zeal, must have given birth to that violent desire of suffering, which was not uncommon in the early ages of our faith. This excessive zeal was very properly checked both by the advice and example of the wisest and most exalted Christians. "Our Saviour," it was truly said, "in commanding us to fly from persecution, did not mean that it is an evil to suffer, or that we should escape from this, as if we were afraid of dying. He wishes us to be the cause of evil to no man, neither to ourselves;—not to the suffering, nor yet to the injuring person. If a man, in killing a fellow-creature, made after the Divine image, sins against God, he who of his own

own accord gives himself up to the judge, is guilty of his own death. And such a one is he who does not betake himself to flight, but boldly offers himself as a victim. As far as lies in his power, he helps forward the wickedness of his persecutors. And if he provokes them besides, that man is as much the cause of his own death as is one who provokes a wild beast." Such was the sensible advice of the best informed Christian teachers, and their example did not disagree with what they taught. For instance, during a time of great suffering in Egypt, numbers of the Christians, to avoid the danger, fled into the mountains, where many perished through want, or cold, or disease; by the hands of robbers, or by the attacks of wild beasts; while some were spared to return again in safety to their homes, when the storm that had threatened them had passed over. Among those that never returned was a very aged bishop of one of the cities in Egypt. He had fled along with his wife into some mountain in Arabia, but although great search was made, no traces of them could be discovered,—not even their bones. Whether they had been torn in pieces by savage animals, or whether they had been seized and made slaves, (as many were,) by the scarcely less savage inhabitants, was unknown :—they had disappeared from the eyes of their brethren! And, it may be observed, a martyrdom like this is quite as precious in the sight of God, as one that may seem more glorious and

more triumphant to man. We have every reason to believe that the hunger and thirst, the cold and misery, the fear and danger, the pain and horror, felt by these poor wanderers in the midst of the silent desert, and in the bosom of the rugged mountain, were seen in secret, and will one day be rewarded openly ;—it may be, in many cases, even in a yet higher degree than those sufferings, which have already in some measure had their reward in the praise and admiration of mankind.

Besides these, we must not overlook another large class of sufferers for righteousness' sake. Who but the Great Judge of all men can at all reckon up the trials, the heart-breaking, never-ending trials, which, during the first three hundred years of Christianity, the wife, or the child, the husband, the parent, or the domestic servant, who believed in Christ, must have endured, unknown to the world, from the unbelief and oppression of those, who were of their own household, and perhaps of their own flesh and blood. We may bring forward one example of this kind, the memory of which has been preserved. A female servant, a slave, named Agathoclia, had a Christian master whose wife was a heathen, and was very anxious to turn Agathoclia from her belief in the Gospel. For eight years was the poor woman forced to bear all the miseries that her cruel mistress could put upon her, till at last, as she would not submit, she was put to death, it is said, in the most barbarous manner. And

here it may be well to remark, the great temptation placed in the way of the unbelieving members of any family, to show their spite and hatred against that portion of it which had received the Gospel. About one hundred years after the birth of Christ, it was decreed by Trajan, emperor of Rome, that, although Christians should not be officiously sought after, still, whenever any person was informed against as a believer, he was to be put to death, if he refused to sacrifice to the gods*. This law continued to be in force for many years, and was occasionally acted upon in the quietest times of the early Church, though during the seasons of persecution, it was for a while set aside by the operation of others yet more harsh and unjust. It is plain how much power a law like this, placed in the hands of any one choosing to inform against such members of the household to which he belonged as were Christians. And even where this power was never made use of, we may imagine the suspicions, the fears, the threats, and the continual uneasiness, which the knowledge that such power was actually possessed, must have occasioned. "You may pluck the heart out of my body, but you

* A curious proof of the strange way in which persons running into quite opposite extremes sometimes agree in their views, occurs with regard to this law of Trajan. The over-zealous Christians were longing to die for the truth, and the heathen priests were thirsting after their blood, so that for both these classes Trajan's law was too moderate; and accordingly both classes did all that was in their power to set it aside.

cannot pluck the truth out of my heart," was the saying of one of those that suffered for Christ's truth. Such a saying bespeaks the firmest confidence in the strength of Christianity, and in the impossibility of that religion being rooted up. Time has shown that this confidence was not misplaced. The life-blood of thousands of faithful witnesses has been spilled, but the truth has not yet been plucked out of the heart of that Church of which Christ is the head, of that body of which they were members. And now the haters of truth are no longer able to attack it with force. They may, and do, use their tongues and their pens, but they cannot lift up their hands against its followers. Christ has triumphed over the princes and powers of the world; He did so before He would admit them to serve him. "He first felt their malice before He would make use of their defence, to show that it was not His necessity that required it, but His grace that admitted kings and queens to be nurses of the Church*." It was a noble wish that was uttered by a female martyr, when she beheld some of her fellow-sufferers being stoned to death, "That with you I may live in Heaven, with you may I perish on earth!" But without perishing as they did, we may ourselves hope to be even as they are. There are other trials besides the fiery trials of martyrdom for the Christian to endure and conquer,

* Bishop Taylor's Sermons, Vol. I., Sermon ix., Part I., page 534, *ed. London*, 1826.

There are other ways to Heaven beside that which is sprinkled with our own blood. Nay, there are cases in which a man may give his body to be burnt, and it shall profit him nothing. Our duty is to endeavour to go through *our* trials as the first believers went through *their* trials; and then, though our paths be different, we shall meet in the end. And, while yet on the way, we may be reminded of the vast worth of that object after which we seek, by learning what a price of sufferings and sorrows they cheerfully paid in order to secure it. "That death which is but the close of a good life is not to be thought evil. For it is what follows death that alone can render it evil. Wherefore, for such as must necessarily die, it matters not so much by what that event is brought to pass, as whither through death they may be compelled to go. And accordingly the Christian knows that the departure of a poor religious man, surrounded by the dogs licking up his blood, is far better than that of the rich ungodly man clothed in purple and fine linen. For, after all, what harm do these horrible kinds of deaths bring to such as have led a good life?"

CHAPTER V.

RECORDS OF MARTYRS.

(IGNATIUS A.D. 107.) This good man was Bishop of Antioch, and had in his younger days been a scholar of the apostle St. John. In his old age he felt not only willing but anxious to bear witness to the truth by his death, and his wishes in this respect were granted. When the Emperor Trajan was at Antioch, Ignatius was (as it seems, at his own desire*) brought before him, and after a dispute in which each party defended his own opinions, the Christian was sentenced to be carried to Rome in chains, and there thrown to wild beasts†. This doom only awakened a feeling of thankfulness in the heart of him upon whom it was passed, at being so honoured by the perfect love of Heaven, as to be thought worthy with the apostle Paul of being bound with iron chains. The reasons for removing him so far from his own home to suffer were, perhaps, to hinder the effect his death might have had among his own people, to terrify the inhabitants of all the places through which

* Here, with all the respect really due to the good bishop's character, we may venture to say that his zeal carried him too far.

† It is well known that one of the favourite sports of the heathen Romans was to see condemned persons torn in pieces by wild beasts, let loose on them for that purpose.

he might pass, and, it may be, either a hope that an old man, such as he was, would be forced to yield to so prolonged a trial, or a desire to make his punishment as grievous as possible. However, he set out upon his journey, and in every city was met and encouraged by crowds of believers, especially by the clergy, whether bishops, priests, or deacons, who came to comfort him, and to beg his blessing. And, firm as he was, he stood in need of some comfort, for he was cruelly treated. "From Syria* even to Rome, both by sea and land, I fight with beasts," said the aged martyr, in a letter written during his journey. "Night and day am I chained to ten leopards† (which are my military guard), who, the kinder I am to them are the more cruel and fierce to me." In the same letter, which was written to the church at Rome, he beseeches his friends by no means to try to save him: "Let me be food for those savage creatures through whom I may obtain God. I am His wheat; I am ground by their teeth, that I may be found pure bread of Christ. Rather beseech the fierce animals to become my grave, to leave nothing of my body, so that when I fall asleep, I may be troublesome to no man. Then indeed shall I truly be a disciple of Christ, when the world shall not even behold my

* Antioch, where Ignatius was bishop, was the chief city of Syria.

† It was customary with the Romans to chain their prisoners to the arm of a soldier, so as to render it impossible for them to move except in his company. Of course the soldiers relieved one another in this disagreeable service.

body. Pray for me to Christ, that by these means I may be found to be a sacrifice to Him. Not as Peter or Paul did, do I command you. They were apostles; I am a condemned person. They were free; I, up to this time, am a slave. But if I suffer, I shall be freed by Jesus, and in Him shall I rise again free. Now that I am in my bonds, I learn to desire nothing that is vain, nothing that is worldly." At last, after a tedious, and yet glorious, progress through many places, the poor old man drew near the end at once of his journey and of his life. We can hardly picture to ourselves the mingled feelings of joy and sorrow with which he was received by his fellow-Christians at Rome. Time was just allowed him to pray with them for the good of the church, for the ceasing of the persecution, and for a spirit of love and harmony among his brethren; and then the aged but willing martyr was hurried out of the world. On one of the great feast-days, when the people were met in the theatre, as usual, to behold its bloody sports, Ignatius was thrown before the wild beasts, and in a few minutes his heart's desire was fulfilled. Nothing was left of him in this world, save only a few bones, which his sorrowing friends carried with them to the city whose church he had so long and so faithfully ruled.

POLYCARP (A.D. 166). Smyrna was (as it still continues to be) a large city on the coast of Asia Minor. It is mentioned in Scripture (Rev. ii. 8) as being at

that time blessed with a Christian church. And the *angel**, or *bishop*, of the church at Smyrna, who is there spoken of, was named Polycarp. He had been spared to a very great age, till at length a persecution began to rage there, and some Christians were exposed to the wild beasts in the theatre†, when a general cry was raised by the people assembled:—"Away with the men that own no gods! Let Polycarp be sought after." At the entreaties of his friends the old man withdrew from the city; but at last, like his master Christ, he was betrayed into the hands of his enemies by one of his own servants‡. When persons came to take him, he ordered food to be set before them, and only begged to be allowed a short time for prayer. This was granted, and the warmth and power of his prayers had such an effect on some, as to make them sorry that they had come against so noble an old man. After this he was conveyed to the city in a chariot along with two persons, one of

* The word "angel," which properly means nothing more than "messenger," though custom has confined its use to the heavenly messengers of the Divine will, was applied by the ancient Jews to the chief ruler of the synagogue. In Malachi the priest is called "the messenger of the Lord of hosts." (Mal. ii. 7.) St. Paul says that he was received by the Galatians "as an angel," or messenger, "of God." (Gal. iv. 14.) And it is generally agreed, according to this usage, that by the *angels*, we are to understand the *bishops*, of the seven churches named in the Revelation.

† The remains of this are still to be seen. It was scooped out of the hollow of a hill, without any covering, and surrounded with seats, rising one above another, for the spectators.

‡ To do the man justice, however, it was not till after he had been put to the torture that he betrayed Polycarp.

whom was a magistrate. On their way his companions asked him what harm there was in saying, "My lord, the emperor*," and in sacrificing, so as to escape in safety. At first he was silent, but afterwards, when further pressed, he positively refused to do this; and then they pushed the poor old man from their chariot, so that he bruised his thigh in the fall. However, he went cheerfully to the place of execution; and on his coming there, amidst the noise of the crowd, a voice was heard from above, saying, "Polycarp, be strong, and quit thyself like a man†!" Being brought before the magistrate, amidst the shouts of the people, rejoicing that Polycarp was taken, the servant of Christ was advised to regard his age, and to join in the cry, "Away with the impious!" Looking gravely around him, and pointing to those who stood about, he raised his eyes towards heaven, and then with a groan repeated the words, "Away with the impious!" applying them to the heathens‡. Being still urged

* The early Christians did not, like the Quakers, object to this mode of addressing their superiors, only it might be mistaken for a consent to the divine honours paid even to the worst of emperors. "In any other sense of the word they could freely call the emperor Lord," says one of the very strictest of them.

† This was considered by those who heard it to be a voice from Heaven. Whether it was so or not it is impossible to say. The voice of some zealous Christian on the top of one of the houses might have had exactly the same effect.

‡ These words were intended only to express his earnest wish that the false worship then prevailing might give way to the power of truth. It is not likely that they were uttered with any uncharitable feeling by one, who, in the only work which remains of him, bids his fellow-Christians to "pray for all saints, and to

to blaspheme Christ, the martyr answered, "Four score and six years have I served Him, and He never injured me; how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?" After some further conversation, in which this faithful believer offered to explain his religion to his judge, but refused to do so to the furious mob assembled round him, the former, who seems to have been as unworthy of regard as the latter, began to threaten Polycarp with the wild beasts, unless he changed his mind. Such a change from better to worse he declared to be impossible. "If you care not for the wild beasts, you shall be consumed by fire," said the persecutor. "You tell me of a fire," replied the martyr, "that burns for an hour, and is in a little while spent. But you know not of that fire of future judgment and everlasting punishment which is in store for the wicked. But why do you delay? bring forward what you please." Proclamation was then made that Polycarp had confessed himself to be a Christian. Upon which a great cry was raised, "This is the schoolmaster of Asia, the father of the Christians, the overturner of our gods, who teaches many neither to sacrifice to them nor worship them." The person at whose expense the public sports were on that occasion given, was then begged by the multitude to let a lion loose upon Poly-

pray also for kings, magistrates, and princes, and even for them that hate and persecute them, and for the enemies of the cross, that their fruit may be manifest to all."

carp. This, however, was refused, as that part of the shows, in which wild beasts were engaged with men, had been already completed. The universal cry then was, that Polycarp should be burnt alive. And they set to work directly, bringing together all the wood and twigs they could collect, in which, with their usual malice against Christians, the Jews living at Smyrna lent a helping hand. The holy bishop having addressed himself, when he saw the pile ready to be lighted, refused to be fastened to it, as it was customary, saying, that He who enabled him to endure the flames, would also enable him without other help to stand unmoved in the midst of them. After a short prayer, in which he returned thanks for having been admitted into the number of the martyrs, the pile was set on fire. A great blaze followed, when the flames, forming themselves into a kind of arch, and appearing something like the sails of a ship swelled out with the wind, surrounded the body of the martyr, but left him unhurt in the midst. To the eyes of his fellow-Christians he seemed like gold or silver that is purified in the furnace; and it is said, moreover, that an agreeable fragrance came forth from the burning pile*.

* How far these circumstances were really miraculous, it is not possible to say. Polycarp's remaining unhurt in the midst of the flames might have taken place without any wonder. In our own country, in Queen Mary's time, the same kind of thing took place at the deaths of Hooper and Ridley. The Christians, accustomed as they still were to such proofs of Divine power, might naturally enough have cried out that it was a miracle. And this would make the heathens anxious to put an end to the

However, as the fire had not its desired effect, the impatient heathens ordered his life to be taken away by the sword, which was accordingly done by one of those whose business it was to dispatch the wild beasts, when they became outrageous. The Christians were very desirous of having the remains of Polycarp, but this favour was refused them. And its refusal was attended with a strange remark, said to have been prompted by the Jews, and showing either the deepest ignorance, or else the most wilful malice on their part. The dead body could not be given up, it was said, lest the Christians should forsake the crucified One, and begin to worship Polycarp! In like manner, it may be observed, on another occasion long afterwards, (A. D. 259,) the ignorant heathens accused a deacon of *worshipping* his bishop, with whom he had been taken. "I worship not Fructuosus, but Him whom Fructuosus worships," was the reply of the Christian minister.

PTOLEMÆUS AND LUCIUS (A. D. 166). There was a certain woman who, together with her husband, had led a very bad and wicked life, until she was converted to Christianity, after which she entirely forsook her martyr's life as soon as possible. As to the perfume, that might easily have arisen from the burning of the scented wood common in those countries, or from some scented matter cast into the flames by the bystanders. After all, the greatest miracle was the undisputed fact, that Polycarp, and hundreds of others, suffered, as they did, not only patiently, but joyfully, for a religion offering merely future rewards.

evil habits, and did everything in her power to induce her husband to do the same. But as all her efforts were to no purpose, after many struggles, she at last resolved to separate herself from him. Upon this he at first publicly accused her of being a Christian ; but, afterwards, dropping this accusation against his wife, all his anger was turned upon Ptolemœus, who had been the means of converting her, and who, as soon as he had confessed himself to be a Christian, was thrown into prison. There he remained a long time, and was then again brought before the judge, and asked the same question, namely, whether or no he was a Christian. To deny this was impossible, as whoever does so, must do it because he condemns the religion, or else he must know himself to be unworthy of it, and estranged from it ; neither of which can be the case with a real Christian. However, Ptolemœus boldly declared his belief, and was ordered away to execution, when Lucius, who was also a Christian, hearing so unjust a sentence, could not help asking the judge why he punished one, who was no adulterer, nor fornicator, nor murderer ; no thief nor robber ; against whom, in short, no harm had been proved, merely because he professed the faith of Christ. To this he added, that such judgments but ill became a pious emperor, or a son of a philosopher*, or a sacred senate. The judge replied

* The son of a philosopher was Commodus, to whom his father, the pious emperor, had given a share in the empire. Mar-

to these honest observations by expressing his opinion, that the person from whom they came was likewise a Christian. This Lucius confessed to be the truth, and he was ordered to be directly taken off to execution along with Ptolemæus, declaring, meanwhile, his thankful feelings at being about to be removed from the power of such wicked rulers into the presence of the King and Father of Heaven.

JUSTIN MARTYR AND OTHERS (A. D. 167). At a time when it had been commanded that all who should be found to be Christians should be compelled to offer sacrifices to idols, Justin* and his followers were brought before the judge at Rome to answer for their religion, to which all of them declared themselves to be much attached. Various questions were put to them, and amongst others, one of them was asked who his parents were. To this he replied that Christ was his true Father, and the faith through which he believed

cus Aurelius was a philosopher, but no friend to the Christians. "A Greek orator met him once in the street, and asked him where he was going. 'A man,' replied Marcus, 'is never too old to learn: I am going to Sextus the philosopher, to be instructed by him. 'Oh, sun!' said the orator, lifting up his hands, 'a Roman emperor, in his old age, trudges with his book, like a school-boy, to his master's house, to learn his lesson!'"

* This great and good man had been a heathen philosopher, but was led to examine and embrace the Christian faith by seeing the virtues of its followers, and their patience under sufferings. Several of his writings have come down to our times, and are among the most precious remains of the early Christians.

on Him, his mother* ; though as to his earthly parents, they were dead. After this the judge, turning to Justin, asked him whether he, who was said to be so eloquent, and supposed himself to hold the true religion, was fully persuaded, that, if he were beaten to death with stripes from head to foot, he would ascend into heaven. "I trust," said Justin, "that, even were I to suffer what you mention, I should receive that which those have who keep the commandments of Christ. For I know that to all who have so lived, the heavenly grace is reserved until the world is at an end." "Then you think," answered the judge, "that you shall ascend into heaven to receive some reward?" "I do not *think*," replied the martyr, "but *know*; and am sure beyond any doubt." "Well," was the answer, "let us come to the business which is before us, and which presses upon us. Agree together, and with one consent offer sacrifice to the gods." "No one," said Justin, "who is right in his opinions, forsakes piety in order to fall into impiety and error." "If you are not willing to obey me, you shall suffer torments without mercy," was the cruel threat of the

* Here is an expression which may prevent any member of our English branch of the Holy Catholic, or Universal Church, from feeling ashamed to acknowledge that Church as his mother, in spite of all the scorn and ridicule which the faults and follies of the Papists, the self-sufficient independence of the Sectarians, and the *bigoted liberality* of Freethinkers may have combined to cast upon such a confession. Polycarp, in his only remaining work, his Epistle to the Philippians, calls the faith delivered to them, "the mother of us all."

judge. "It is the chief object of our desires," was the noble reply of the martyr, "to endure torments, and to be saved for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. For this will procure for us safety and confidence at that awful judgment-seat of our Lord Jesus Christ, before which the whole world shall stand by Divine command." In these feelings all the other accused Christians partook; and they besought their judge to do speedily what he pleased, as they were Christians, and sacrificed to no false gods. Their wishes were granted in this respect; sentence was passed upon them, and they were beheaded, after they had been severely beaten. Their bodies were secretly carried off by their brethren in the faith, and were afterwards laid in a suitable place of repose.

THE MARTYRS AT LYONS (A. D. 177). Lyons is a very ancient city in the south of France, and, more lasting than most others, it still remains a place of great importance, as it was nearly seventeen hundred years ago. There were living in it at that time numbers of Christians, against whom so great a feeling of hatred was awakened among the multitude of unbelievers, that they were completely driven from the public places, the baths, the market, and in short from every spot. This persecution, accompanied as it was by the insults and violent attacks of the mob, they endured with the utmost patience, till at length some show of justice was made, and certain believers in

Christ were brought before the magistrates. Here when somebody had offered to plead their cause, he was stopped by being asked whether he was a Christian, and upon his confessing that he was, they placed him also among the accused. And now a fresh trial, as grievous as any of their former ones, befel this faithful body of believers. About ten of their number forsook their religion through fear, and thereby damped the spirits of those still remaining firm, and filled their minds with grief and distress. In the meantime other persons, chiefly taken from the best and most active members of the Church, were daily added to the number of prisoners. The slaves* belonging to these Christians were tempted, through fear of torture, to accuse their masters† of crimes too horrid to be named, so as to set against them even those who before had been somewhat favourable to their cause. In this state of things the Christians were put to the most cruel torments, during which one of them, a poor weak woman, for whose firmness they had trembled, remained unmoved and immoveable, saying that she was a Christian, and that her persecutors could do her no harm. Another woman, who had been among

* In those days hired servants were very uncommon, and Christians, as well as heathens, had their slaves. Indeed the word "servant" in the Epistles generally bears this meaning. The change wrought by the Gospel in the morals and habits of men is not the less great and wonderful from its having been a gentle and gradual one.

† Here we may see how completely the saying was brought to pass that "a man's foes should be those of his own household."

the deserters of their faith, was aroused, as it were, from her slumber of conscience ; and having renewed her former profession, became one of the martyrs. Several of these, overcome with torture, expired in prison, amongst whom was Pothinus, bishop of the city, a man not less than ninety years of age. This aged confessor, whose body was as full of disease and weakness as his mind was of courage and strength, was attacked by the mob after he had been questioned by the magistrate, and then was overpowered by numberless blows ; those standing near inflicting on him cuffs and kicks without any the slightest regard to the age of the sufferer ; while those at a greater distance threw at him whatever happened to be at hand to them. From these cruelties he was removed to his prison, where in two days he expired. When they were wearied of tormenting the Christians, the heathen rulers put an end to their sufferings in various ways. The woman who had before behaved so nobly, was exposed to wild beasts, but these it is said refused to touch her*. In the meantime the persons who had at first fallen away returned to their faith ; and this so enraged the heathens that they put to death one Alexander, a physician, for having by a mere nod of his head encouraged those who were before the judgment-seat, boldly to confess their reli-

* This is no uncommon occurrence in the accounts of the trials of the early Church. How far it might be a witness to the truth from above, and how far it might depend on accidental circumstances, it is not for us at this distance of time to decide.

gion. And even after they had done their very worst to the martyrs while yet alive, these persecutors were not satisfied. The greater part added every possible insult they could contrive to the dead bodies ; and when at last they had burnt these, and thrown their ashes into the river Rhone, they boasted of having taken from them every hope of rising again. And even the less violent among the enemies of the truth, who seemed to have some little feeling for the case of the sufferers, reproached them, by asking where their God was, and of what use to them was their religion to which they had devoted their lives ? The humbleness of mind shown by these martyrs at Lyons towards their fellow-believers, the charity exhibited by them towards their enemies, and their kindness to such as had shrunk back in the day of trial from an open confession of faith, were all remarkable. Indeed it seems altogether as if the virtues of these good men had been in proportion to the pains they endured, and the terrors to which they were exposed.

EPIPODIUS AND ALEXANDER (A. D. 178). After the general persecution which, as we have seen, took place at Lyons, when it was supposed that the Christian name was nearly destroyed there, two more persons were betrayed by their servants, and brought under the notice of the government. These were two young men, named Epipodius and Alexander, who

had been at the same school together, and had ever since continued in the strictest friendship. Both of them were equally zealous in the faith and practice of the Christian religion. During the fury of persecution, being unable to escape into another place, they sought concealment in their own city, and found it in the humble dwelling of a religious and faithful widow. Here, however, they were at length discovered, and seized in so sudden a manner, that Epipodius left one of his shoes behind him, a relic that was afterwards kept with the greatest care by the poor woman who had given him shelter*. Having made the usual profession of their faith before their judge, the two friends were separated, in order that they might not in any way encourage one another. When this was done, Epipodius, who seemed to be the younger of the two, and was therefore thought more likely to give way to such arts, was attacked by flattery and pretended kindness. "I see," said his judge, "that you are a young man, and it would be a shocking thing for you to continue to follow an evil object to your own destruction. We are worshippers of the immortal gods, whom all people, whom, in their own names, the most sacred princes, have agreed to reverence. We worship them with mirth, with feasting, with song, with sports, with revelling, and with

* Strange stories respecting the wonderful cures performed by this woman by means of the martyr's shoe have been told by Roman Catholic writers, and believed by Roman Catholic peasants.

every freedom of indulgence* ; whilst you worship a crucified man†, to whom such as enjoy all these things are displeasing, who rejects mirth, who delights in fastings, who condemns pleasure, and admires a dismal and barren chastity." He then finished by urging the young man to enjoy, as became his years, the blessings of this world with delight and gladness, and to avoid strictness and severity. To all these arts the youthful martyr turned a deaf ear, replying that the soul was made to rule, while the body was intended to be subjected and kept under. Enraged at such an answer, the judge commanded the young man to be struck violently in the mouth. However, the latter, unmoved by this act of cruelty, made his confession of Christ, even whilst his mouth was filled with his teeth all crushed and mingled with blood. He was then put to torture, but the barbarity of the judge was too slow for the fury of the multitude, who demanded that Epipodius should be given up to them that they might stone him. The judge, not willing to encourage such unruly proceedings, ordered him to be directly dispatched with the sword,

* All this was true enough, and may account for the attachment of the multitude in general to the heathen worship.

† We must bear in mind, that, in those times, to be crucified was thought the very lowest depth of disgrace. In our own country no notion can be formed of its reproach, because amongst us the punishment of death is inflicted in the same way on criminals of all but the highest rank. Besides we have no slaves, and therefore no idea of the disgrace attached to a cruel punishment chiefly confined to culprits of that class.

and so ended his sufferings. On the next day his friend Alexander was brought before the magistrate, who told him, among other things, that he believed him to be almost the only Christian remaining at Lyons*. Nothing, however, could move him, and, after undergoing great sufferings, Alexander was at length crucified. Though he had been parted from his friend at his death, in the grave they were no longer divided. Their bodies were taken away secretly by some of their brethren, and were both laid together in the same tomb. The rage of their enemies in doing its worst had served only to procure them a crown of glory.

PERPETUA AND FELICITAS (A. D. 202). In consequence of that warmth of feeling which has, in all ages and countries, been a distinguishing mark of the female sex, Christian women have seldom been found wanting in zeal and courage, however they may have shown themselves at times wanting in prudence and judgment, with regard to religious matters. The two martyrs whose sufferings we are now about to consider, were both females, and were placed in the most trying of all situations. One of them had a child yet at the breast, and the other was far advanced in pregnancy. The father of Perpetua was a heathen,

* How would the spirits of any one but a Christian martyr have been bowed down by such a declaration! How firm must have been his faith in the sure word of promise that the gates of hell should never prevail against the Church!

and at three different times during her stay in the prison did he try by every means in his power, by reminding her of his own gray hairs, and of the helpless state of her little infant, to work upon her, and persuade her to save her life by forsaking her religion. But all was in vain. Deeply as she felt these ties of nature, she was too full of zeal for the truth to be drawn away by their force from the strait but rugged path which she had chosen. In reply to her father's entreaties she asked him, as she pointed to an object that stood near them, whether that thing could be called by any other name than its own. And upon his owning that it could not, she exclaimed, "Neither can I be called by any other name than what I am,—a Christian." After Perpetua had been baptized (under the feeling that in this she was preparing only suffering for the flesh), she was in a few days thrown into a dark and miserable place of confinement, which, however, when her infant was brought to her, became, as she said, more of a palace than a prison. Here she was favoured, as is reported, by a vision; encouraging her to endure all present pains for the sake of the future reward that was in store for her. Several others were fellow-sufferers with Perpetua, amongst whom was a woman named Felicitas, who holds a chief place in courage and patience. When in prison, her fears lest she should not suffer at the same time with the rest were

put to an end by the untimely birth of her child*. One of the heathen officers about the prison was cruel enough to ask, on hearing the poor woman's cries of distress, what, since she felt so much then, she would feel, when cast before those wild beasts, which, through her unwillingness to offer sacrifice, she had hitherto despised. "I now suffer what I suffer alone," replied she; "but then will there be One who will suffer for me†, because I also shall be suffering for His sake." The child to which this high-minded Christian had given birth in her day of trouble was brought up by an aunt, as her own daughter. After much further cruelty and insult, when at last the martyrs were brought to the theatre to be destroyed, they ventured to tell their judge, that, though he had judged them, there was One who would judge him. The helpless women were to be exposed to a furious cow, irritated for that purpose, as an unusual punishment. But even the fierceness of the multitude gave way before the constancy and courage of the martyrs; and they were spared this last piece of savage insult, by being put to the sword. All except Perpetua endured the death-blow in silence, but she could not help crying out from the pain caused her by its being

* It is a very old and almost universal law that forbids women in such circumstances to be executed.

† In Acts ix. 4, Christ speaks of himself as suffering, when that Church, of which He is the head, is persecuted: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?" was his question to the future apostle, who had never, perhaps, so much as seen Him in the flesh.

badly aimed. Still, even in this last and agonizing trial, did she remain so calm and resolute in soul, that she was able herself to direct the hand of the unskilful executioner, so that he might at once put an end to her misery in this world, and open to her a beginning of happiness in another.

ST. LAURENCE (A. D. 258). This martyr, whose name seems more familiar to our ears than that of some others, on account of its being borne by many of our churches, was archdeacon of Rome at the time when Sixtus was bishop of that city. This last was put to death on account of his religion, and when Laurence expressed his sorrow at parting from his bishop and spiritual father in God, the old man comforted him by telling him that he would soon follow him, as he so much wished, along the very same path of grief and suffering. The heathen governor was desirous of getting hold of the treasures of the church, of which he understood Laurence to have the care; and accordingly asked to see them. A little time to arrange them was sought and granted, and when this had expired, the poor and needy, who were supported from the bounty and collections of the church, were brought before the grasping heathen; while Laurence, pointing to them, said:—"These are the treasures of the church!" But such treasures as these were quite a disappointment to the greedy hopes of the governor, so that, enraged with the cause

of his mortification, he ordered Laurence to be executed. It is said, though the story is somewhat trifling and its credit doubtful, that, after many other torments had been patiently endured, the martyr was placed upon a sort of gridiron, and roasted to death on a slow fire. And this trial he is reported to have borne so calmly, as to bid his persecutors turn him on the other side, after he had been suffering for some time in his first posture*.

ST. CYPRIAN (A. D. 258). Cyprian was a person of such importance that it may be worth while to attend to some of the events which marked the former part of his active life, as well as to those which took place at its close. He was brought up a man of education, and a heathen, but afterwards, somewhat late in life, having been converted to Christianity, he behaved in a way so worthy of his new profession, that he became a priest, and was at length elected Bishop of Carthage, the city where he dwelt, by the almost universal consent of the people†. It was much

* As Laurence dwelt at Rome, and suffered just in the middle of the third century, we may turn to Gibbon's statement of the number of believers in that city at that time. There are records to show that the clergy there were then a bishop, forty six priests, seven deacons, and nearly a hundred inferior orders, as sub-deacons, readers, &c. The number of widows, infirm, and poor, maintained by the faithful was 1500. And from these facts he reckons the Christians as being about 50,000, out of a population of not less than a million.

† In early times the bishops were elected by the people, or at least with their approval. But so great disturbances arose in

against his will that this office was forced upon him, as he did not think himself worthy of it. However, having once undertaken it, he tried, not without success, through the rest of his life, to fill it in a becoming manner. One of the most violent of all the persecutions against Christianity arose at this time, and Cyprian (not, as he afterwards proved, through any dread of death, but through his tenderness for the welfare of his church,) fled from Carthage, though by means of letters he still kept up a communication with his clergy there. Besides the hitherto-unheard-of torments which the heathens were then inventing for the trial of the courage of those that believed, a still more trying and threatening evil was abroad. A spirit of schism and dispute, springing from different causes into which we cannot now enter, prevailed among the churches of Africa, and called for all the zeal and talents of Cyprian to withstand it. And neither in zeal nor talents was he at all deficient, though the warmth of his temper sometimes led him, both in his words and actions, to overstep the bounds of moderation and prudence. In little more than a year he again returned to his bishopric, in which he found enough to do, and to bring into order.

About this time broke out a dreadful plague in many elections, even before anything like wealth was attached to this sacred office, that such a mode of appointment fell into disuse. In this, as in many other cases, it is more easy to see and feel the evils arising out of certain systems than to point out one that shall be free from all objection.

countries, and among the rest in Africa, which gave Cyprian and his fellow-Christians an admirable opportunity of showing their virtues and patience in softening the miseries and enduring the horrors of such a calamity*. Such natural evils as these were always thought by the heathens to proceed from the anger of their gods against the Christians, but Cyprian, when the disease had ceased to rage, wrote a discourse, in which he shows it to be more reasonable to suppose it to have arisen from the anger of the Almighty against such fierce persecution of those that believed in His Name. It was not likely that so active a servant of Christ would be allowed by those amongst whom he lived to go down into his grave in peace. Having made his declaration of faith when brought before the governor, and openly professed that a resolution founded on God could not be altered, he refused to discover any of his clergy, and was sent away to a small town, in which banishment he was treated kindly enough, and remained for some time. Here, it is said, he was informed by a vision of the way in which he should suffer. And on that very day twelvemonth was he put to death by being beheaded, in the presence of an immense crowd of admiring Christians†, who

* For a further account of the conduct of the Christians during this plague, see page 184.

† This proves the increasing number and boldness of the Christians, who were not at all afraid to show themselves openly. It proves also that, even in times of great persecution, it was chiefly the principal persons in the Church that were sought after, while those of less consequence were overlooked and disregarded.

beheld their beloved bishop enduring in the calmest manner all that his enemies laid upon him, and themselves longed to follow his glorious example, and suffer with him. Such a desire indeed was agreeable to the doctrine taught by him, whilst he was yet among them: "Why," he asks, in his discourse concerning the plague, "since the world hates a Christian, do you love so dearly that which hates you, and not rather follow Christ, who both loves you and has redeemed you?"

NICEPHORUS (about A. D. 260). There was in Antioch a certain Christian priest named Sapricius, who had a friend, a layman, called Nicephorus, to whom he was much attached, and with whom he had long lived on the closest terms of affection. At length, unhappily, these two friends disagreed, and their anger became so bitter, that they were unwilling even to meet one another in the streets. This bad feeling lasted for a long time on either side, till Nicephorus, coming, as it were, to himself, and perceiving the wickedness of such hatred, made an effort, by means of some persons well-known to both of them, to regain his former friend. This effort was repeated again and again, but all to no purpose. At last Nicephorus going to the house of Sapricius threw himself at his feet, and begged forgiveness for the Lord's sake. But this, in spite of all his entreaties, was refused by the other, who quite forgot his duty

as a Christian, a priest, and one who had taken upon him the service of God. In the meantime a persecution arose, and Sapricius, when seized, having confessed himself to be not only a member, but also a minister*, of the Church, refused to forsake his faith, and was put to torture. This he bore with patience, telling his judge, that, whatever power he might have over his body, he could have none over his soul, which was Christ's, who had created it. At length sentence of death was passed upon the courageous, but unforgiving Christian. His friend Nicephorus hearing of this, hastened to meet him, and, falling down at his feet, said to him, "Oh, martyr of Christ, forgive me, if in anything I have sinned against thee!" Still he received no answer. After this he made a second attempt, but in vain. The officers were astonished, and said that they had never seen so foolish a man, asking him why he was seeking pardon of one just about to die, and actually on his way to execution. Nicephorus told them that they knew not what he was seeking from a confessor of Christ, but God knew. As a last effort, when Sapricius had reached the place of execution, his friend, unwearied by his coldness and obstinacy, reminded him of those words of our Saviour, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall

* Here again we see that the *priest* was seized, while the *layman* was left undisturbed. Christianity was increasing and forcing itself into notice, and the heathens soon began to make a distinction between the clergy and laity.

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find ; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." But nothing could move him. He was like the deaf adder, and even against the winning charms of Christian love and affection his ears were closed fast and impenetrable. Such forgetfulness of his duty as a Christian and a minister of the Church produced its natural effects. When bidden to kneel down in order to receive the blow that was to deprive him of life, Sappricius felt his heart sinking within him. His ill-will against his brother had robbed him of that Spirit who alone could have supported him in such a moment. "Strike me not," said the unhappy man to the officers ; "I am ready to do what the emperor commands, and sacrifice to the gods." Nicephorus, who was standing near, as soon as he heard these words, urged the failing Christian not to transgress and deny his Saviour ; beseeching him not to fall away from Christ, and lose thereby the crown of glory, which, through so many trials, he had nearly obtained. But, as before, he still kept his heart shut against his former friend, and so the gates of the kingdom of heaven were shut against him. Then Nicephorus, seeing that all his persuasion was useless, came forward himself, saying, "I am a Christian, and I believe in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom that man has denied. Let me suffer in his place*." His wish could not of course be complied

* Admirable as his character is in all other respects, we must own that Nicephorus seems to have been too desirous of suffering

with, until the governor had given his orders. A message, accordingly, was sent to say that Sapricius had promised to sacrifice to the gods, but that another person desired to be put to death for Christ's sake, exclaiming that he was a Christian, and would not sacrifice to the gods, or obey the emperor's decrees. Upon this an order for the execution of Nicophorus was sent back, and in obedience to it he was shortly afterwards beheaded.

GENESIUS (about A. D. 286). This person was an actor and mimic. It is said that one day he was entertaining the Emperor Diocletian with some mimicry of the Christian observances, particularly of baptism. Soon after this he felt a very strong desire really to become a Christian, and was at length baptized. Being, as was customary at that sacrament, clothed in white, he was seized by the soldiers in sport, and brought before the emperor to be examined respecting his religion, whom he addressed in these words :—"Listen to me, oh emperor! and you, soldiers, and chief men, and people of this city. Whenever I heard the name of Christian mentioned

for the sake of the truth. Great allowances, however, must be made for such conduct in the early believers. Wrong as it was in itself, it proceeded from an excess of right feeling in many cases. So little love had they for the world, that they felt too strong a desire to quit it. So great was their love for their Heavenly Master, that they were sometimes too impatient to be with him. So weak is human nature! so liable to corruption are our virtues themselves!

it was with horror ; and many times have I insulted those that continued to profess that name. On that account I hated my parents and kinsmen*, and so much did I despise Christians, that I made careful inquiry into their mysteries, in order to furnish sport for you from their sanctification. But when, in acting a baptism, the water touched me, and I was about to reply, that I believed, I saw a hand coming from Heaven, and shining angels standing above me, who read from a book all the sins that I ever committed. This book they presently washed in the water, in which I was dipped in your sight, and then showed it to me whiter than snow itself. Now, therefore, oh noble emperor! and all you people who have been making sport of these mysteries, believe along with me that Christ is indeed Lord, that He is the light, the truth, and the religion, and that by Him you may obtain mercy." At these words the emperor became very angry, and commanded Genesius to be cruelly beaten with clubs, and otherwise tormented, in order to make him sacrifice. Nevertheless he remained firm, and only lamented his former errors, and the lateness of his confession of the truth, until at last his sufferings and his life were brought to a close together by his being beheaded.

* This will serve to explain the cleverness of Genesius in such mimicry. His friends were Christians, and so he had means of becoming fully acquainted with their observances.

MARTYRS OF PALESTINE (A.D. 303—310). During a persecution in Palestine, which lasted no less than eight years, and of which a full account is preserved, numbers of faithful Christians lost their lives*. Among these two or three examples may be particularly noticed. In the fourth year of the persecution, it happened that one of the emperors† (Maximim) kept his birth-day at Cæsarea, and, according to custom, gratified the people with shows and games of the most expensive kind. Everything rare and uncommon was sought after, strange animals and wild beasts from the most distant part of the earth were brought

* One of those who suffered was a bishop of the Marcionites, a sect of very bad principles and opinions, but, unlike most of the other Gnostic sects, furnishing a good many martyrs. This bishop, "led by a zeal, as he thought, for religion, but not according to knowledge, was burnt in one and the same pile with some of the faithful." We may hope that such sincerity, however mistaken, may find mercy with God. It may here be observed, that in early times all Christians, whatever might be their other differences, agreed in having their clergy ordained by bishops, as the successors of the apostles. *In modern times*, the first act of a new sect of Dissenters is to build a meeting-house; the next is to find somebody to set up that is likely to fill it, and then its foundations are laid "broad and strong." *In ancient times*, the first thing thought of by any new sect was to get some bishops, of their own way of thinking, in order to secure a supply of ministers among them. This practice is a strong evidence of the importance attached of old to the ordination of the clergy.

† At this time the Roman empire, instead of being as heretofore under one single person, was subjected to no less than four rulers, of whom two were superior, and bore the name of *Augustus*, while the two inferior (of whom Maximim was one), were called *Cæsar*.

together to furnish sport, and the most wonderful feats of strength and agility were performed by men who had long been in training for this purpose. But something far grander, and more justly deserving of admiration than usual, was exhibited at these games in the behaviour of the martyr Agapius. He had been condemned two years before to be thrown to the wild beasts, and three times had he been removed from his prison, and carried, along with other criminals, to undergo this sentence. But, whether through compassion, or in the hope of leading him to forsake his resolution, the judge had each time merely threatened him, and kept him for some future occasion. At length, when the emperor was there, Agapius was brought forward with a criminal who was said to have destroyed his master. As Barabbas escaped while Christ suffered, so in like manner was this wretch thought deserving of the mercy and clemency of the emperor, while the Christian was left to die. This act of kindness towards the condemned criminal caused great applause through the whole theatre; and, meanwhile, Agapius was summoned before the emperor, and offered his life and liberty if he would give up his religion. This, however, he would by no means consent to do, saying, that he was ready boldly and cheerfully to undergo whatever punishments might be laid upon him. And no sooner had he said this than he ran to meet a bear just then let loose upon him, and willingly offered himself to the devouring rage of

the wild beast. After he had been much injured, he was carried back, yet breathing, to his prison, where having lived over another day, stones were made fast to his feet, and he was flung into the sea. So ended the sufferings of Agapius.

About two years after this, a person of the name of Paul suffered. Just before his death he begged a few minutes from the executioner, which being granted, he prayed with a loud voice to God for the whole body of Christians, beseeching Him to be reconciled to them, and shortly to restore to them peace and security. He then prayed, first, for the conversion of the Jews, and afterwards for that of the Samaritans. And having done this he besought God for the Gentiles, whose minds were entangled in error and blinded by ignorance, that they might be brought to the knowledge of Him, and receive the true religion. Nor did he forget to mention the mixed crowd of bystanders then assembled. He then, upon his knees, and in the hearing of all present, besought Almighty God in behalf of that judge who had condemned him to die, in behalf of the emperors, and of the man about to behead him, that the crime committed against him might not be laid to their charge. When he had thus prayed with a clear voice, whilst others, moved with pity, were shedding tears at the approaching death of so innocent a person, he was not at all discomposed, but extended his neck to receive the blow, and was speedily set free from the troubles of this world.

Among some of the last that suffered during this long and dreadful trial of Christian courage was an Egyptian, named John. This good man had lost both his eyes, which had been put out by means of red-hot iron. He was also lame, as one of his feet had been injured by the same cruel torture. However, he was a person of such virtue and talent that he did not feel the loss of his bodily powers, as most men would have felt it. He was able to repeat nearly the whole of the Scriptures so correctly, that he seemed only to be reading from a book. The author of the account of the Martyrs of Palestine had himself seen and heard this faithful servant of Christ, and brings him forward as a proof that it is the inward soul and understanding, rather than the outward bodily frame, which constitutes the man. For John, although his body was injured, did but put forth the greater strength and excellence of his other powers on this account.

FELIX (A. D. 303). When the enemies of the Christian faith began to find themselves completely baffled in all their attempts to put it down by main force, they were naturally led to inquire into the cause of such courage as they daily beheld displayed in the conduct of the true believers. It needed no great search to discover that all their motives, their zeal for God, their hopes of the future, their scorn of things present, their indifference to pain, their

willingness to die, arose from a careful study of their Bibles, and a regular attention to the Gospel, as it was preached to them by the authorized successors of the apostles, the bishops, priests, and deacons of the Church. In order to take away the last-named support from the Christian religion, and check the increasing freedom with which the Gospel was taught, it was common, as we have seen, to select the clergy as especial objects of persecution and cruelty. But when this had been done for a long time, and it was found that the places of those that had been cut off were instantly filled up by others, not at all less ready and willing than those who had gone before them to suffer in the cause of their great Master, the heathens endeavoured to remove the other grand support of the Christian's religion, the reading of the Bible. Proclamations were made by the emperors, in which all magistrates in every part of their dominions were ordered to demand of the clergy, that they should deliver whatever copies they might have of the sacred writings*. When these tyrannical commands reached a certain city in Africa, Felix, bishop of the place, was absent at Carthage. One of the priests, being sent for by a petty magistrate, was asked whether they had the Scriptures. And upon his replying that they had,

* It is needless to observe that before the art of printing was discovered, such copies (owing to the time and labour, as well as care, required in making them,) were scarce and valuable.

he was asked to deliver them up that they might be burnt*. The priest said that his bishop had the books, and that he did not know where he was. However, on the following day Felix returned, and being brought before the same officer, was bidden to deliver up the books or parchments that he had. This he would not do, declaring it to be better that he should be burnt than the Scriptures; and that it was right to obey God rather than man. Three days were given him to consider his resolution; but as it still remained unchanged, he was brought before a higher officer, and, for some unknown reason, was passed from one to another till he was at last sent to the emperor. However, whilst on his journey he was sentenced and put to death. Before his execution, raising his eyes to Heaven, he said with a loud voice; "I thank Thee, O God;—forty and six years do I number in this world. I have lived chastely, I have kept the Gospels, I have preached the faith and the truth. Lord God of Heaven and Earth, Jesus Christ, to Thee do I bow my neck as a sacrifice,—to Thee, who abidest for ever, to whom glory and majesty for ever belong. Amen."

* It is sad to think that the example of such heathen hatred of the holy Scriptures should ever have been followed by any Christian Church,—that the successors of those Roman Christians whose "faith" was once "spoken of throughout the whole world," (Rom. ii. 8,) should have so far forsaken the faith as to forbid the common reading of that Book which is the treasure-house of the faithful.

IRENÆUS (A. D. 304). This person was a bishop, who, when brought before the heathen magistrate, had refused to offer sacrifice. Upon this he was put to torture, and whilst he was suffering under it, a fresh trial came upon him. An anguish of soul to which no bodily pains could ever be compared was to be undergone by him. He was not an old man, and his parents, who were yet living, besought him to give way. And besides these on one side were his children, (for he was a married man,) embracing his feet, and begging him to take pity on them. On the other side, was his wife weeping over him, and praying him to regard his youthful years and change his resolution. His servants, his friends, and neighbours, all urged him to the same purpose, but without success. Nothing could move him,—he looked down upon them, but made no answer. After many torments had been for some time applied in vain, he was again brought out of prison; and when he still remained firm as before, his judge wishing, perhaps, to remind him of the ties that bound him to this life, asked him whether he had a wife. "No," was the martyr's reply. "Have you children? have you father or mother?" were the heart-breaking questions of the cruel heathen, and the same answer was returned as before. "Who then were those that were weeping with you when you were last before me?" was the next inquiry. "This is the command of my Lord Jesus Christ," said the patient sufferer;

“He that loves father, or mother, or wife, or children, or brothers, better than Me, is not worthy of Me.” “Offer sacrifice, if it be but for their sakes,” replied the judge. “My children,” said the prisoner, “have the same God as I serve, and He is able to save them. As for you, do as you are commanded.” This request was soon complied with, and he was put to death, leaving behind him an example, which all must admire, but no one can dare to say that he should be able to follow.

PHILIP (about A. D. 304). This person was Bishop of Heraclea, which place he refused to leave, (as he was advised, when a persecution was expected there,) remaining at his post, and encouraging all about him to be patient and courageous. When an officer came, by command of the governor, to close and seal up their church against the Christians, Philip comforted his people by reminding them that God dwelt not so much in houses made with hands, as in the hearts of men. On the next day, much to the grief of the poor Christians, the officer removed all that he could find belonging to their church, which he had sealed and taken into possession. Philip, leaning against the church-doors, did what he could to keep up the spirits of his flock, reproving the backward, and encouraging those that were willing. Afterwards he was brought before a magistrate for breaking the law of the emperor, by which Christians were forbidden

to meet together. He was commanded to give up any vessels belonging to the church, whether of gold or silver or any other metal, and any copies of the Scriptures which he might have, on pain of torture if he refused. Of torture, he told them, he was not afraid; as to the vessels he promised to give them up, since Christians worshipped God, not with precious metal, but with fear; and Christ was better pleased with ornaments of the heart than of the church. The Scriptures, he added, he would not give up, since it neither became him to deliver them, nor his judge to receive them. While Philip was suffering for this reply, Hermes, a deacon under him, who was standing near, exclaimed, that, let them do what they would to destroy all marks and vestiges of the truth, still future times, regarding the memory of their fathers, and the good of their own souls, would multiply copies of Scripture, and teach with more zeal than ever the fear that is due to Christ. For this saying, Hermes was beaten severely, and he then went to the place where all the vessels and Scriptures lay concealed. He was followed thither by a greedy, dishonest officer, who tried to take some of the things to his own use. This Hermes opposed, and for so doing received a blow on the face which drew blood. However, as soon as the governor heard of it, he was angry with the officer, and ordered the wound to be attended to. Afterwards the soldiers were let loose, and all the churches were

stripped of their roofs, while whatever copies of the Bible they could find were publicly burnt. In the midst of these misfortunes Philip animated the people by a discourse, and afterwards steadily refused to offer any sacrifice, and in this respect Hermes followed the good example of his bishop and father in Christ. Both were then cast into prison, where they remained till a new governor came, less mild even than the former, who was the more willing to hear what was said, because his own wife was a Christian. At the command of Justin, the fresh governor, Philip was bound by the feet and dragged through the city, by which usage he was much wounded in all parts of his body. Another friend of Philip, named Severus, was afterwards taken and thrown into prison, until both these, together with Hermes, were ordered to be removed to another place, where, as they still clung fast to their faith, they all three suffered, being burnt to death*.

* In reading of such insults offered to the churches and Scriptures as those related above, we are reminded of the words of a convert from heathenism, in a work said to have been written by him before he was admitted to baptism. "Why," he asks, "do our Scriptures deserve to be cast into the flames? why do our churches deserve to be barbarously destroyed, wherein the great God is prayed to; wherein peace and pardon is besought for all magistrates, for soldiers, for kings, for friends, for enemies, for those still living, and for those freed from the bonds of the flesh; wherein nothing is heard but what makes men worthy the name of man, gentle, modest, chaste, attached to one another as members of the same family, and willing to share their goods with all? But so it is; because you have more strength by the

AFRA (about A.D. 304). This woman, who was living during a time of great persecution in a city in Germany, had formerly been a person of bad character, though she had afterwards entirely changed her course of life. Being brought as a Christian before the magistrate, she refused to sacrifice, saying that the sins she committed before she knew God were enough, without adding this to them. After some more persuasion, her judge reminded her that her iniquities had made her hateful to the God of the Christians*, and advised her to sacrifice at once. She replied to this by declaring her reliance on the mercy of her Saviour, who did not despise even publicans and sinners. Returning to the same argument, the magistrate afterwards told her that Christ did not consider her worthy, and that it was not reasonable to call him her God when He did not own her : "for," added he, "a woman who has lost her good fame cannot be called a Christian."—"I confess myself," replied she, "to be undeserving of that name, except by the mercy of God, who judges not from our merits, but from his own kindness. He it is that has admitted me to this title."—"But how do you know that He has?" asked her judge.

sword and the force of steel, you think also that you surpass us in the knowledge of truth."

* The witness here borne by the heathen to the purity of the Christian faith deserves our notice. The clouds of falsehood at first raised against its morality were soon dispersed before the light of truth.

"By this," returned Afra, "do I know that I am not cast out from the presence of God,—because I am allowed to come to a glorious confession of His holy name, whereby I believe that all my sins will receive a free pardon."—"This is nonsense," said the unbeliever; "you had better sacrifice to the gods, by whom you will obtain safety."—"My salvation," answered the repentant sinner, "is Christ, who, when He was hanging on the cross, promised the blessings of Paradise to the thief that acknowledged Him." The judge then grew impatient, and condemned her to be burned. She was, therefore, immediately carried to an island in the neighbouring river, and there being stripped and tied to the stake, she lifted up her eyes to Heaven, and with tears uttered a prayer to Christ, "who came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance, who had condescended plainly to promise forgiveness of sins to those that were penitent, that He would accept of her repentance in her hour of suffering, and release her, through that earthly fire then about to consume her body, from that everlasting flame which burns both body and soul." And then, when the fire was just lighted, she was heard to say :—"I thank Thee, Lord Jesus Christ, who hast deigned to accept me as an offering for Thy name!—who hast offered up Thyself upon the cross to be a single sacrifice for the whole world, the just for the unjust, the good for the evil, the blessed for those that were under a curse, the one without sin

for all sinners. To Thee do I offer my sacrifice, who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, livest and reignest God for evermore. Amen."

JULIUS (*date uncertain*). This person, who had formerly been in the army, was brought before the magistrate for disobeying the emperor's command, and refusing to offer any worship to the gods. The heathen argued with him, asking him what great harm there was in burning a little incense*, and then departing. Julius said that he could not go from the Divine commands and obey unbelievers, appealing to his character as a soldier for six-and-twenty years, and telling his judge not to expect one who had been faithful in less things, to become unfaithful in things of more consequence. After some further conversation the judge said to him, "Julius, I see that you are a wise and grave man. Be persuaded, then, by me, and give way." Julius refused, and his adviser, who seems not to have had the least notion of a "God who knoweth the heart," went on saying, "If you think it wrong, let me bear all the blame. I will use force to you, so that you may not seem to give way willingly. Then you may go home, and live securely. I will give some money, and no one

* It was considered to be a forsaking of the Christian faith if any one did this before the images of the gods. Burning perfumes was a common part of religious worship in the east, and it is to be found among the Jewish ceremonies. (Exodus xxx. 8.)

shall trouble you in future." Julius rejected this offer with horror, and begged to be condemned as a Christian. The magistrate threatened him, but in vain; he only said he should be thankful if he would fulfil his threats. "You are in a hurry to die," was the answer, "and think that you will suffer for some glory."—"If I am worthy to suffer," observed Julius, "my glory will never cease."—"That might be the case," returned the other, "could you be persuaded to suffer for your country and its laws."—"I am indeed suffering for some laws," said Julius, "and they are heavenly ones."—"Those," said the heathen, "which he who is dead and crucified gave you. Consider how foolish it is to pay more regard to one who is dead, than to kings who are living,"—"He has indeed," replied the martyr, "died for our sins, in order to give us everlasting life. But, nevertheless, He is God that abideth for ever; and whosoever shall confess Him shall have eternal life, whilst he that denies Him shall have perpetual punishment*."—"I am sorry for you," answered the judge, "and still advise you rather to offer sacrifice, and continue

* Some heretics, unlike the martyr whose words are related above, explained this text to suit their own purposes. Christ, they argued, did not say "He who denies that he is a Christian," but "He who denies me;" and therefore, said they, our faith may be denied without our being shut out from the kingdom of Heaven! Owing to this it was, that the persecutors often forced one who had denied his religion, to deny and blaspheme his Saviour also.

with us."—"To live here with you would be death to me, whereas to die is life," said the resolute Christian. And being again reproached with having chosen death in preference to life, he remarked that he had only chosen to die to time and live to eternity. When it was seen that nothing could shake his firmness, he was sentenced, and shortly afterwards put to death.

Having now brought to a close our account of the Christian martyrs in very early times, we may make a few short observations before we finally take leave of the subject. Two very different descriptions of feelings may be awakened in the hearts of those who read of such trials. The greater part will, it is most likely, feel thankful that they have been spared them, and will bless God that they have never been called upon to endure persecution. Such feelings are natural, and if they spring only from a deep sense of gratitude for present advantages, and a want of confidence in our own strength, they need not be checked. But if a love of this world and its enjoyments, if a want of trust in that grace which is always ready, and always sufficient, for the believer in his hour of trial, have any share in the birth of such feelings, then must we be on our guard against them, as signs of a worldly heart, and of a soul that is faithless instead of believing. Such a state of mind is at no time a safe one, and least of all is it so at this time,

when we know not how soon or how severely our patience and courage may be tried*. But, on the other hand, there may be a few whose warmth of temper may tempt them, when they read of the noble conduct of Christ's faithful soldiers, almost to envy them their sufferings, and to lament that it is now impossible to fight the same good fight, and gain the same glorious victory, as they did. Such warm-tempered persons may be reminded of St. Peter, who, on more than one occasion, was not only foremost in courting danger, but foremost also in shrinking from it. And as his rashness and eagerness became afterwards sobered down into a holy and Christian fortitude, so too, by the Divine blessing, may theirs likewise become. "It is one thing to be wanting in *spirit* to suffer as a martyr, and quite another

* Within sight of some of our own shores is Ireland. We all know what our Christian brethren and fellow Churchmen have been enduring there for the last three or four years. Even the history of the early Church can hardly equal in horrors the present history of that starving portion of our own Church. "Take the martyrs with all the advantages (if I may say so) which arose from the public exhibition of their firmness; and are their sufferings to be compared to the silent but hallowed endurance of our brethren, in a country where no eye sees the agony of their pain, but that eye which sees only to relieve? Take the martyrs with all that can add (if anything can add) to the glory of their dying hour, in the face of day, expiring nobly for the principles which they advocated; and then carry your feelings to the land you have just now heard described, where there are indeed martyrs every hour, amidst pangs the other martyrs knew not of, and pangs, I fear, which it is impossible, perhaps, for us totally to relieve."

thing to have the *spirit* without the *opportunity* of suffering. Accordingly as God finds you, when he calls you out of the world, will He judge you, as He does himself bear witness, saying, "And all the Churches shall know that I am He which searcheth the reins and the heart.' (Rev. ii. 23.) For He seeks not our blood, but our faith. Neither Abraham, nor Isaac, nor yet Jacob were slain, and, nevertheless, through the worthiness of their faith and righteousness, were they honoured, and deserved the chief place among the patriarchs ; and to their company shall every one that is found faithful, and just, and praiseworthy, be gathered."

CHAPTER VI.

MANNERS AND CUSTOMS OF THE EARLY CHRISTIANS IN RESPECT TO DIVINE WORSHIP, &c.

It is often observed by those whose taste does not lead them to inquire into the events and actions of the past, that the history of mankind is little better than a history of deeds of blood, a chronicle of wrongs and injustice. This observation, so far as it has any truth in it, furnishes a striking proof of the fallen state of human nature; and certainly he must be quite ignorant, both of himself and of his fellow-creatures, who could expect, in reading of the actions of men, to find them all purity and perfection. Still it cannot be allowed that nothing of a pleasing character, no glorious deeds of virtue, no worthy examples of excellence, are to be found among the records of the past, even when these are concerning heathen nations. History has been called a looking-glass, in which human actions are reflected; and as the conduct of men is chequered with good and evil, the mirror that reflects their conduct must be so chequered likewise. This is true of all accounts of past ages, and among the rest, of that which is now before us. One advantage the history of the early Christians has over all others. There is an unusual proportion of good to be found in it, and that good is of an

unusually bright colour. Its splendour partakes of the hues of heaven, and this has been fully and faithfully drawn by the hands of those, who were themselves eye-witnesses of it, and whose warm but sober pictures have come down even to our own times. We have now listened long enough to deeds of cruelty and blood, we have heard enough of that savage heathenish fury, which hunted down the harmless and the helpless with a hatred worse than mortal. It would be wearying and disgusting to pursue any further the consideration of that barbarous wit, which was for ever at work to find out fresh modes of torment, and add new evils to the long list of human sufferings; or of that cold-hearted enjoyment of distress, which could delight in letting some hungry beast, or some fellow-creature, (still fiercer, and thirsting after innocent blood,) upon the man that had done no wrong,—upon the tender youth, the aged bishop, or the timid female, if they would not blaspheme the name of their Redeemer. We have had examples enough, too, of the courage and meekness with which every trial was not merely borne, but welcomed, by the unshrinking souls of the first Christians. It is now time to turn from these painful, though interesting scenes, to others, less striking, it may be, but not at all less deserving of our attention. From the seat of judgment, but not of justice, occupied by the proud heathen, from the prison crowded to suffocation, from the theatre sprinkled

with blood, from the fields strewed with the dead bodies of the saints, lying as meat for the fowls of the air and for the beasts of the land, let us turn to the peaceful assemblies, to the simple but touching worship, to the strict though tender discipline, to the orderly government and venerable practices, of the early Church. However, even here we shall be painfully reminded that we are still reading the history of weak imperfect man ; even here, if we expect nothing but excellence, we shall be disappointed. Among Christians, and those too Christians of the early ages, we shall find faults and blemishes. We shall have to trace the first openings of those divisions by which the Church of Christ has since been rent asunder ; we shall hear even in those distant times the first mutterings of that voice of priestly Roman pride, whose thunders have since shaken kings upon their thrones ; in short, we may see, from the page of history, that many of those shadowy forms of falsehood which are even now amongst us doing their work of deceit, were abroad upon the same errand, and with no less success, nearly two thousand years ago. And therefore, though we must admire the virtues of the first believers ; though we own, as truth compels us to own, that many of them were such men as are scarcely now to be found ; still we must bear in mind that, after all, they were *men*, and, as such, not too hastily to be followed in every respect. While we love them and venerate them, never let us forget that they are our

brethren ; and when we are seeking a rule whereby to walk, let us not go, with the Romanist, to " tradition and the fathers," nor, with the wild religionist, to our own " inward light " (which may, after all, be but darkness); let us rather go, as our own Church bids us, to the word of God himself. And there having learned the right way, we may look to the early Christians for examples of the zeal with which we should walk therein ; we may look also for the inward grace of Heaven to guide our steps and to keep us from falling. " A thousand may fall beside us, and ten thousand at our right hand," but so long as we act thus, no harm, —no spiritual harm,— " shall ever come nigh us."

With regard to public worship generally, the following remarks by a Roman Catholic writer (Fleury) are so very just, that, at the risk of being somewhat tedious, they shall be copied at length. " Although it is true," he says, " that the Christian religion is altogether inward and spiritual, yet Christians are men as well as others, and therefore not above the power of sense and imagination. Devotion therefore must be assisted by the impressions of sense. Were we angels, we might pray in all places alike, in the hurry of the roads, in the crowd of the streets, in the noise of the guard-chamber, or in the confusion and riot of a tavern. Why then do we shun these places of distraction, and when we would be devout, seek after silence and retirement, but only as a remedy against the weakness of sense and imagination? It is not

God that hath need of temples and places of prayer, but *we*. He is equally present in all places, and always alike ready to hear us everywhere, but we are not always in a frame of mind fit to address Him. Hence places devoted to Divine service should be kept in a condition proper to assist our religious feelings. Suppose a church so badly situated that it echoes with the noises of a neighbouring street or market,—suppose that it is not even kept cleanly and decently,—suppose every attempt at devotion is disturbed by the thronging of people, the cries of children, or the solicitations of beggars. Let nothing but disagreeable objects meet the eye,—the walls covered with dirt and mouldiness, the pictures with dust and cobwebs, the statues badly made, or disfigured, and the other ornaments in as miserable a condition. For music let a multitude of untuned voices be mingled together in the harshest discord. It will be much easier for a man to pray in an open field, or in a lone uninhabited house, than in such a church as this. On the contrary, let a man go into a church well built, beautifully adorned, and neatly kept; where all things are still and quiet, the people well placed, and the clergy performing the office in a regular manner, and with a becoming reverence and humility; he will find himself by degrees engaged to attend to the service with a composure of thought, and will be able to pray with the heart at the same time that he speaks with the lips." We can scarcely read the

above observations without feeling our preference of our own decent ornaments and quiet places of worship over the vain show and pomp of the Roman Catholics strengthened and established.

In order to commence our account of the religious customs of the early Church with the first step in the life of a Christian, we may proceed to consider the mode of administering baptism. Although there can be no reasonable doubt, that infants born of Christian parents were baptized then just as commonly as they are now, still, so long as there remained a large body of heathens to supply fresh converts to the truth, many of those who received this sacrament were persons already grown up. Such persons, as soon as they declared their wish to become Christians, were admitted to be catechumens, or, as we should say, learners of the catechism. It was then their duty to make themselves acquainted with the chief points of the religion which they desired to embrace. When they had been often examined by the clergy, had learned the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, and had studied certain parts of Scripture, they were allowed, after much preparation and fasting, to offer themselves for baptism. As there were commonly many of these in training at one time, it was customary to admit them into the Church together at certain seasons, especially at Easter and Whitsuntide, and during the fifty days between these great

feasts*. Just as in the present day men too often put off partaking of the other sacrament, the Lord's Supper, till almost the last hour of life, so did the early converts sometimes delay their baptism; and as now the danger and mistake of the former practice is a common subject of discourse from the pulpit, so then was the other practice frequently reprov'd by the clergy. "If Israel," says one of these, in a sermon preached against this kind of delay, "had not passed through the sea, they had not got rid of Pharaoh; and unless thou pass through the water, thou wilt not be delivered from the cruel tyranny of the devil. He cries, Give me to-day, and give the morrow to God. But God says, To-day, if you will hear my voice. The devil gives us hope of to-morrow, but when to-morrow is come, as a fraudulent divider, he again asks that day for himself, and yields the next to-morrow to God." Some converts were very fanciful about the time or place of their baptism, or the person performing the rite. An ancient author brings them in making such excuses as these:—"I stay till Epiphany, the time when Christ was baptized†, that I may be

* Some remains of this custom may be found in the Rubric before our service of public baptism, where "Sundays and holy days" are said to be "most convenient for its administration."

† The ancients kept the baptism of Christ on the Epiphany, as it was then manifested to the world who he was. At that time also did He "sanctify water to the mystical washing away of sin."

baptized with Him ; I rather choose Easter, that I may rise with Him ; I wait for Whitsuntide, that I may honour the descent of the Holy Ghost. And what then ? In the mean time comes death suddenly in a day thou didst not expect, and in an hour thou art not aware of." Others, unlike the Syrian leper, (2 Kings v. 12,) fancied that Jordan was the only stream wherein they might "wash and be clean." They needed to be told, that wherever Christ was, there was Jordan. And nothing would serve a third class of persons but to be baptized by a bishop, or a person of noble birth or uncommon purity. These are warned not to make themselves judges of the fitness of the preacher or baptizer, because there is Another that judgeth of these things. When the time for administering baptism was arrived, all who were desirous of receiving it were required to make an open and public promise, first, to renounce the devil, and, secondly, to obey Christ, after which they professed their faith by repeating the Creed*. Every person, whether an infant or grown up, had one sponsor, and no more ; each male had his godfather, and each female her godmother, though all, if of suf-

* Before A. D. 471, the Creed was repeated only at baptism. After that time it was used in the Eastern churches at the communion-service, but it was not till long afterwards that it became general in the churches of the West. In very early times, when heresy and false doctrines were chiefly confined to those who had never belonged to the church of Christ, it was not necessary, as it now is, to renew the confession of the faith so frequently.

ficient age and understanding, were obliged to answer for themselves with their own mouths. Those that were dumb were sometimes baptized, if they had been desirous of this before they had lost their speech, or could at all signify their wish for it. We read of an African negro slave who had been instructed in the truths of religion, and was just ready to be baptized, when he fell sick of a fever, and became speechless. However, he was admitted into the Church, others answering in his name, just as if he had been a child newly born. When the confession of their faith was finished, those desiring to enlist themselves as Christ's soldiers were sometimes anointed with oil*. The sign of the cross was then made upon their foreheads, which, says St. Austin, is always joined with baptism. After this a prayer, that the water about to be used might be made holy for the purpose, was offered up by the priest or bishop if he was present. And then all things being arranged with the utmost decency and order, the parties went down into the water†, and plunged under it three separate times, at the naming of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The act of dipping the head under was said to represent

* Priests, prophets, and kings were so appointed under the Jewish law, and this marked them, as Christians, to be "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation."

† It must be borne in mind that in those warm climates it was common to bathe or dip the whole body. Those only who were sick, and received this sacrament in bed, were baptized by sprinkling.

Christ's death and their own dying to sin ; their abiding beneath for a time signified his burial, and the destruction of the power of sin ; and their coming up again out of the water denoted their resurrection to a new course of life. "We are thrice dipped in the water," says St. Jerome, "that the mystery of the Trinity may appear to be but one ; we are not baptized in the names of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but in one name, which is God. And therefore, though we be thrice put under water to represent the mystery of the Trinity, yet it is reputed but one baptism." When the new-made Christian had come out of the water, he was always clothed in white, to show that his sins had been washed away, and his soul made clean. This white garment was given to him with some such words as these : "Receive the white and spotless garment, and bring it forth without blemish before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ, that thou mayest have eternal life. Amen." It was customary, whenever the bishop was present, to have a confirmation immediately after the baptism. Even infants were confirmed, and were also sometimes allowed to eat of the Lord's Supper. No one was allowed to receive the Lord's Supper until he had been confirmed, and this was done by anointing with oil, by making the sign of the cross, and by laying on of hands with prayer. If the bishop was not present, the new-made Christians were confirmed shortly afterwards, when each neighbourhood was visited for that purpose.

Sometimes, it seems, the white garments were not put on till after confirmation. This dress was worn for a whole week, and then laid up in the church, as a kind of witness against those who might break the promises by which they had become entitled to wear it. Our Whitsunday (White Sunday) is supposed to have taken its name from the numbers thus clothed that commonly appeared in the churches on that day. On such an occasion it was said :—

The milk-white robe their souls refulgent shows,
Whilst o'er his flock with joy the shepherd glows.

And the following lines were written for a place wherein they used to baptize, or baptistery, as it was called :—

The priest paternal, from the sacred spring
Babes, pure in body, soul, and dress, doth bring.

It was common to give the kiss of peace to the new member of Christ's Church, and as no one was ever permitted to call upon God as his Father, until he had been made "a child of God," by the waters of baptism, he was then for the first time allowed to repeat the Lord's Prayer publicly, and to receive the Lord's Supper; and in some places it was the custom to wash his feet, (especially at Milan, where this was the bishop's office,) according to John xiii. 14.

Following the order in which the services stand in our prayer-books, and also that in which they occur to us in life, we may proceed from the consideration

of the forms of baptism and confirmation used by the early Church, to inquire into the form observed in those times at Christian marriages. There are, unhappily, some amongst us, who would fain make us believe that this, the most serious and important event in a man's life, ought not to be looked upon in a religious point of view. They would place it quite upon a level with any other matter of agreement between two parties, stripping it of all those religious forms and obligations, which at present unite in rendering it as much more solemn and binding, as it is more important and interesting, than any other contract that can possibly be made. Such were not the opinions of the early Christian Church, any more than they now are the opinions of the Church of England. Indeed, in times of old, a double kind of ceremony was in use. First came the espousals or betrothing of the parties, and then, some time afterwards, their marriage*, each of which was usually a public and solemn act. When both parties had freely consented to an union, their espousals were witnessed by gifts, generally offered by the man, which were publicly recorded. After this, it was customary for a ring to be given to the woman, and then a solemn kiss and joining of hands completed the betrothment,

* These two separate forms are blended together in our marriage-service, in the first portion of which the persons to be united solemnly promise what they *will do*, whereas after the question, "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" they declare what they are *actually undertaking to do*.

which usually took place before no less than ten witnesses. We may here remark, as the custom still remains amongst us, that the use of a ring in marriage was common of old in almost all nations. In Christian marriages it serves as a pledge of the agreement made between the two parties, as well as of the authority bestowed upon her to whom the ring is given, and of the honourable liberty to be enjoyed by her. The ring, generally having the master's seal upon it, was used as a mark of authority; as, for instance, when Pharaoh set Joseph over the land of Egypt, he put his own ring upon him; and so, too, did king Ahasuerus, first to Haman, and afterwards to Mordecai. (Gen. xli. 42; Esther iii. 10, and viii. 2.) The same thing was done as a mark of honour and affection by the rejoicing father to his returning and repentant son in the parable. (Luke xv. 22.) So that from these examples we may gain some idea of the honourable and respectful feelings intended to be expressed by this ancient sign of a lasting union and unceasing attachment*.

* What has been said above will help to throw light upon the meaning of those impressive words which in our service follow the giving of the ring, and which have been sometimes misunderstood. Looking at the ring as a pledge of mutual agreement, it is with *that*, that the wedding is ratified. Looking at it, again, as a mark of respect and honour, *worship*, (that is, in the old meaning of the word, See 1 Chron. xxix. 20; Luke xiv. 10, *respect* and *honour*,) is offered by the husband to his partner. Lastly, regarding the ring as a sign of trust and au-

Within two years, at furthest, of the espousals, it was usual for the marriage itself to be celebrated; and this was always done by the ministers of the Church*. They pronounced their blessing upon the couple, and prayers were offered up in their behalf; a veil was put upon the bride, and the hands of each were joined together, after which it was usual, except in second marriages, to crown them both with garlands, and then the woman was carried home to her husband's house. Among the heathens, on these occasions, the mirth was often carried beyond the bounds of sobriety and good order, but all such excess was strictly forbidden among Christians. Nevertheless, as they borrowed some of the innocent ceremonies of marriage, the ring and the garlands for instance, from the customs of the heathens, so they did not disapprove of harmless mirth, or a moderate feast of joy on so happy an occasion. "For how," says an ancient Christian writer, "can I sufficiently set forth the happiness of that marriage, which the Church makes, or conciliates, and the offering confirms, and the blessing seals, and the angels report, and the Father ratifies?"

thority, an equal share and right in all his worldly goods are given by the man to her who has just consented to become his "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer."

* Other forms of marriage, still good in law, but borrowed from the heathens, or irregular unions, as with an unbeliever, or between half-believers, or very careless Christians, might take place, but these were not sanctioned by the Church.

The next service to which we may turn our attention is that of the burial of the dead, the last and most solemn office of the Christian Church. Great attention was paid to this duty by the early Christians, and the heathens, seeing this, reproached them with weakness, because they could not always bury their dead as they would have wished. St. Austin replies to this by saying, that "it would be absurd for men who were not afraid of death itself, to fear their not being buried when dead; that such ceremonies were intended rather as comforts for the living than as any help to the deceased. The bodies of the departed, especially of the just and faithful, which, during life, the Holy Spirit has used as vessels and instruments of all good works, are not to be cast out and despised, if this can possibly be prevented. But when such has been the case, it was no fault of the living, who could not help it, nor was it any punishment to the deceased, who could not feel it*." The burial-places were commonly vaults dug in the open country at some little distance from the towns. In such places the ashes of those who, according to the custom of the heathens, were burnt, being gathered up and put into an urn, were deposited. This practice was never given in to by the disciples of Christ, who were always

* According to Julian their kindness to strangers, their care in burying the dead, and their pretended holiness of life, were the causes of the Christians gaining so much ground in the world as they did.

in the habit of simply burying the bodies of the dead, which, however, they often embalmed with spices and perfumes. The heathens always had their funerals in the night, considering that to be the season best suited for grief, and also having a notion that the bare sight of such a thing as a funeral was unlucky, and rendered them not fit to worship their gods. The Christians, on the contrary, unless they were hindered by force, always chose the day-time for their burials. And as this last office was not to them, as to those who had no hope, without its consolation, sometimes, especially in the East, they would carry, even in the broad daylight, torches and lights before the dead, to express their joy and sense of his triumph over this world. It seems that it was not a very early custom to set apart, by consecration, certain places for the burial of the dead, as no notice of such a thing is to be found till nearly six hundred years after Christ. But in fact, so great a respect was paid by the heathens themselves to all places of this kind, as to render any further separation of them unnecessary*. As soon as the Christian was dead, his eyes and mouth were closed, his body was washed in water, and "the new clothing of incorruption," (as one calls the funeral robes,) was put upon him. Some-

* In proof of this feeling we may bring these lines by an ancient poet:—

"The thing is sacred, wretch, touch not my tomb;
E'en impious hands dare not disturb its gloom."

times, after the Christian faith had made its way amongst all ranks of society, very expensive cloth was used for this purpose, and St. Jerome, by way of ridiculing such a fashion, bids the wealthy to spare on this occasion the riches they so dearly loved ; and asks them why they wind up their dead in clothes of gold, why their ambition does not cease in the midst of mourning and tears ; and, lastly, whether the bodies of the rich cannot perish except in silk ? The corpse was commonly borne to its last resting-place by the nearest relatives, or by persons of consequence, or any charitable persons, according to circumstances. In times of pestilence, or in the cases of martyrs, so great was the care bestowed by the Christians upon their dead, that they would often put their own lives to hazard in the performance of these offices. In heathen funerals the corpse was preceded by music, and hired mourners, whose business it was to lament the departure and sing the praises of the deceased ; but in the room of all this, the singing of psalms was brought into use by the early believers. To be carried to the grave in silence was thought a grievous thing, and the usual psalms were denied to none but those that had destroyed themselves, or had been executed for some crime, or had wilfully neglected baptism. Moderate, but not excessive, sorrow was allowed to be shown on this occasion ; and when the feelings of some had carried them too far, they were reminded of the faith and hope expressed in the psalms sung over the dead.

"The heathens," says one of the Fathers, "beholding such grief, doubt concerning our faith, and say, that if we were really persuaded that our dead were gone to a better life, we should not so lament. Therefore let us be ashamed to carry out our dead after this manner. For our psalms, and prayers, and solemn meeting of fathers, and such a multitude of brethren, are not that thou shouldest weep, and lament, and be angry at God, but give Him thanks for taking a deceased brother to Himself." Sometimes, on the death of a person of consequence, there was a funeral oration made, when the corpse had reached the place of burial. But whether this was done or not, the whole service of the Church, not excepting the Lord's Supper, was performed, if the funeral took place in the morning*; if in the afternoon, only psalmody and prayers. Thanks were returned to God for having kept the deceased in the knowledge of His truth to the day of his death; certain portions of Scripture containing the promises of a resurrection were read by the deacon, and a hymn to the same effect was used. The whole service ended with a prayer for the dead, that his sins might be forgiven, and himself might be admitted into happiness†, after which the body was committed to

* The Lord's Supper was commonly received fasting, and therefore in the morning only.

† Respecting prayers for the dead among the early Christians, we speak in another place.

the earth. There crept in a certain custom in some places of giving the kiss of peace, and even the Lord's Supper, to the dead, but this was forbidden afterwards, because, whereas our Lord said, "Take and eat," dead bodies could neither take nor eat it. Money was commonly given away after a funeral, and some, upon the yearly return of the day, would make a feast for their neighbours, especially the poor; but this, as might have been expected, was abused, and became an occasion of offence. The beautiful and affectionate custom of strewing with flowers the grave of the departed person, (a custom still kept up in some parts of our own island,) was allowed, as being harmless, though borrowed from the heathens. Christians were also permitted to wear mourning, although it was not reckoned becoming their profession to show too many tokens of sorrow. Cyprian, one of the most zealous of the ancient bishops, tells his hearers, "that they ought to long after the dead, and not lament them, nor wear any mourning habit, seeing they were gone to put on their white garments in Heaven." It may be allowable, before we quit the present subject, to say something respecting one of the most difficult passages in Scripture, which we are often in the habit of hearing in our burial service: — "Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptised for the dead?" (1 Cor. xv. 29.) It is said that no less than *seventeen* different modes of

explaining this have been proposed. A story is told of the practice usual with the Marcionites, a sect of Gnostic heretics*, that, when any of those among them who were preparing for baptism died, they were in the habit of concealing a living person under his bed. Then, going up to the corpse they would ask, whether he wished to receive baptism; and when no answer was returned, the person under the bed would reply for him, and be baptized in his stead. To this strange custom of these heretics some have supposed St. Paul to refer; but their heresy had not begun at the time when he wrote. It is not possible to state for certain the meaning of his words, but it seems most likely that "being baptized for the dead," signifies "being baptized for the hope of the resurrection of the dead;" and then the meaning of the passage may be seen by any one, clearly showing that if the dead rise not, the baptized Christian loses the very hope into which he was baptized.

As we have now gone through most of the occasional religious offices of the early Church,—the Lord's Supper, (as we shall soon see,) was not an *occasional* office in those times,—we come next to a consideration of the places and the manner in which

* See page 44, note 20.—Although not at all to our present purpose, we may here mention two great errors of the Marcionites respecting baptism. First, they would not admit married persons to partake of that sacrament; and, secondly, they allowed it to be repeated at three different times.

public worship was then regularly performed. As to the places, the commencement of anything like a Christian church is that "upper room" mentioned in Acts i. 13, wherein all the disciples "continued with one accord in prayer and supplication." Upon the same spot the first Christian church is said to have been built. From this humble beginning did the believers in the Gospel go on increasing and enlarging their places of worship, until at last they arrived at the highest pitch of grandeur. But, alas, the faith and purity of the worshippers did not advance in proportion to the size and splendour of the buildings in which they met; indeed, they did not keep even their first level, but sank by degrees into a miserable deficiency. At this very day every thinking and feeling mind must lament as well over the folly and mummery by which, in Roman Catholic countries, some of the finest of these buildings are disgraced, as over the decay and ruin which such follies have long ago brought down upon the beautiful abbeys whose remains are scattered about our own land. The early churches were built in different shapes and figures, but an oblong form, something like that of a ship, seems to have been very general*. It was a common thing to compare the church, *considered as a body of faithful Christians,*

* We can still trace the ancient fashion, for our word *nave*, signifying the body of a cathedral from its western entrance to the choir, is derived from *navis*, in Latin a ship.

to an ark sailing, as it were, upon the waves of this troublesome world, and the only means of securing a passage to the heavenly abode which we would all wish to reach*. One of the ancients speaking of Christ walking on the sea, (Matt. xiv. 24—32,) says that “the little ship tossed up and down in the sea represented the Christian Church, which suffers persecution and affliction in the world, while the Lord sleeps, and seems patiently to overlook it, till being awakened by the prayers of his saints, in the latter days He shall check the raging world, and restore tranquillity to his servants.” With such notions respecting the Church, considered as the body of which Christ is Head, it is not to be wondered that the church, or building in which His members met to worship God, was often made somewhat to resemble a ship in its figure. Sometimes, however, an eight-sided figure, or the form of a cross, (as in our own cathedrals,) was preferred. The arrangements in the inside were, of course, different in different buildings. There were generally in populous places a number of penitents, or persons under censure of the Church, and desirous of being restored to their former privileges. These were commonly divided into four classes, each of which (from those who were beseeching the prayers of the faithful at the porch, to those who were admitted to share in the whole service except the Lord’s Supper,) had

* See the first prayer in the Baptismal service.

its proper place in the Christian temple. There was also a place set apart for those who were in training for baptism, and these were not allowed to stay during the communion. The rest of the congregation in those early times of Christianity was composed of "the faithful," as they were called, who partook of this service, and the clergy. The men and women were seated separately, the reading-desk or pulpit was in the middle of the church, and in the chancel, behind the communion-table, were seats for the bishop and his clergy. As image-worship was so common a thing among the heathens, pictures and statues of every kind were forbidden any admission into the churches ; and the undue respect, and even worship, offered them by the ignorant Roman Catholics shows that it would have been well if they had continued to be so forbidden. In a letter written in those times from one Christian bishop to another, we have a story which shows how strict they were in this respect. "Coming," says the writer, "to a village*, and going into a church to pray, I espied a curtain hanging over the door, whereon was painted the image of Christ or some saint ; which when I saw hanging up contrary to the authority of the holy Scriptures, I presently rent it, and advised the guardians of the church†

* This village was in Palestine, in the diocese of John, Bishop of Jerusalem, to whom the letter was written.

† These were something like our churchwardens. The whole story is natural enough, and might almost have taken place in one of our English villages, where it is often curious to see the

rather to make use of it as a winding-sheet for some poor man's burying. Whereat, when they were a little troubled, and said that it was but just that I should give them another curtain, I promised them I would, and have now sent the best I could get, and pray entreat them to accept it, and give command that for the time to come no such curtains, being contrary to our religion, may be hung up in the church of Christ." It does not seem, that churches were formally consecrated in the very early ages of Christianity; at least we have no proof that they were so for the first three hundred years. Afterwards it was customary, as it is now with us, for the bishop to do this; and no church could be erected in any part of his diocese without his leave, or until he had made a solemn prayer, and fixed the sign of the cross in the place chosen for it*. It became customary afterwards to keep as a kind of feast for the parishioners the day on which their church had been first set apart to the service of God; and some remains of this are yet left in the wakes, which are still kept up in some parts of the country, usually on the Sunday next after the day of the saint whose name the church bears. But, as every body knows, these feasts have

reluctance with which anything called an *ornament* of the church (however unworthy it may be of the name,) is parted with. Still the feeling is a good one on the part of the wardens, as it implies a sense of the trust belonging to their office.

* Here we are reminded of our own custom of laying with some ceremony the first stone of a public building.

quite lost their religious character, and are too often occasions of riot and intemperance*. When once the building had been made sacred to God, it was never allowed to be profaned by any other use. And in like manner when any plate, ornaments, or other gifts had once been offered to the church, they could not be applied to other purposes, except in case of very great and pressing calls of charity, such as a time of famine, or the redeeming of captives from slavery. Nearly four hundred years after Christ, Ambrose, bishop of Milan, melted down his communion plate for this last purpose. He had given up so much of this world's goods, and had shown himself so far above any mean actions, that he could venture upon more than other men. But still some Arian heretics found fault with him for doing this, and he defends himself by asking,—“Is it not better that the bishop should melt the plate to sustain the poor, when other support cannot be had, than that some sacrilegious enemy should carry it off by spoil and plunder? Will not our Lord remonstrate with us on this account? Why did you suffer so many persons to die with famine, when you had gold to provide them sustenance? Why were so many captives car-

* The death of a man, killed in a battle after excessive drinking at a parish wake in Shropshire, has given rise to a useful little tract by Archdeacon Bather, called “The awful Case of Drunkards,” and well worthy of the notice of all who ever give way to intemperance of this kind. The tract is on the list of the Society for promoting Christian Knowledge.

ried away and sold without redemption? Why were so many suffered to be slain by the enemy? It had been better to have preserved the vessels of living men than lifeless metals. What answer can be returned to this? For what shall a man say?—I was afraid lest the temple of God should want its ornaments? But Christ will answer, My sacraments do not require gold, nor please me the more for being ministered in gold, as they are not bought with gold. The ornament of my sacraments is the redemption of captives, and those are truly precious vessels which redeem souls from death."

From the places wherein Christian worship was celebrated in the early ages, we may now proceed to consider the manner in which that worship was commonly performed in public. Wherever it was possible, daily service was usual, and upon this the clergy, with such laymen as were at leisure, were expected to attend. The services were divided into two parts,—that of the catechumens, or persons preparing for baptism, and that of the communicants, or partakers of the Lord's Supper, which was always regularly administered on the Lord's day. Along with the first-named class of worshippers, heathens or heretics of any kind were allowed to attend the Church. A preacher in those days reproving vanity in dress, brings in a heathen complaining of the Christians, and saying, "I went into one of their churches, and there I heard Paul say to their women

that they should not adorn themselves with gold, or pearl, (1 Tim. ii. 9,) but I saw every thing contrary in their practice.' And," continues he, "when such a one sees the women thus adorned in the galleries above, and hears Paul thus speaking below, will he not be ready to say that our religion is mere vain show and fable?" At the end of the sermon it was usual for the deacon to say, "Let none that are only hearers, none of the unbelievers, be present;" then, as soon as these were gone, followed certain prayers, after which the catechumens went away, together with the different classes of penitents, with these words:—"Ye that cannot communicate, walk away and depart*;" and afterwards the communion-service was begun. Having thus shown the distinction between the two principal portions of the ancient service, we may begin to describe each in its order,—only we must observe beforehand, what would have seemed quite needless but for the strange custom in the Romish Church of performing its services in Latin, that all was performed among the early Christians in the common, or "vulgar tongue," as

* It is painful to reflect that at present by far the larger number, not only of baptized Christians, but even of regular attendants on Divine worship, should of their own accord place themselves in the condition of these mere learners of Christianity in former times. In a few of our cathedrals the weekly sacrament is still administered; otherwise once a month is the most frequent return of this sacred feast, and in many country parishes four or five times a year only is that table of the Lord spread; and yet how thinly is it often attended, how much is it neglected!

it is called in our prayer-books. Into this tongue, whatever it might be, the Bibles were translated, and copies of these were laid in the churches for people to read, if they pleased, before or after the time of service. These two lines, written over a place* where such copies were kept, have been preserved :—

If on the heavenly law to muse inclined,
Here may you sit, and with it feed your mind.

So much attached were they in those days to the reading of the Scriptures, that these were their constant companions, and some Christians have been found buried with the Gospel on their bosoms. And with such reverence were these sacred records viewed by the believers, that it was customary to wash the hands before they touched them, and also for the men to be uncovered, and the women to cover their heads, (as a mark of respect,) at the reading or hearing of Scripture.—(Fleury, *Manners of Christians*, p. 53.)

It may be well here to make one more observation, which is, that the early Christians never, as far as we know, used any other than set forms of prayer in their public worship, unless it was while the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, common among the immediate successors of the apostles, were still to

* It must be remarked that Bingham, who, in Book 13, chap. 4, sect. 6, speaks of this place being open to *all the people*, says elsewhere (Book 8, chap. 6, sect. 22), that it was for the *priests alone*.

be found upon earth. In this respect they did but follow our Saviour's own example, who, by giving His disciples a certain form of prayer for their use, and by frequenting the service of the Jews, where such forms were customary, gave countenance to this practice. Indeed at first the offices, or liturgies, as they were called, were composed chiefly from the Divine forms, such as the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms, the blessings used by the apostles, and the form of baptism fixed by Christ. To these were added prayers and thanksgivings at the discretion of the bishop, and according to circumstances. No example of the practice now common amongst our Dissenters, of following their teacher in a prayer of his own composing, is to be found in the early Church. And, after all, as it has been truly said, this is, *to the congregation*, no less a set form than any in our prayer-book. The difference between us is this. Their forms are set them solely by the taste and judgment or by the feelings of their teacher, whereas our forms are set us by the united wisdom of many wise, and learned, and good men, have been carefully selected from the choicest patterns of ancient worship, have been tried and approved by many succeeding generations of pious Christians, and are (as we hope and trust they will long remain,) unchanged and unchangeable by any private judgment. Another difference also between us is, that we are always aware of what is coming, and have nothing to do, as soon as we hear it, but to

follow it with all our hearts; whereas they, not at all knowing what may come next from their teacher's mouth, have in one single moment to learn what that is, to consider whether they approve of it, and then to join in it*. The only objection of any real weight against the use of a book of common-prayer is, that it may cause carelessness or neglect, through a constant habit of hearing the same words repeated. It is not our business to deny that this, like all other good institutions, may be abused; all we have to do is to take care never to be ourselves justly chargeable with any such abuse.

It is the good and sensible advice of one of the fathers of the Christian Church, that both men and women should come into the congregation decently attired, with simple gait, in silence, with love unfeigned; pure in body, pure in heart, and fit to address God in prayer. When they were assembled, it is supposed that their service commenced with a psalm or

* Among men of common minds, such as form the mass of every congregation, one of these two things is almost sure to happen, if no set form of prayer is used:—Either they will follow their teacher, without taking the trouble to consider what he says, as carelessly as any one could follow our forms with his prayer-book before him; or else they will be too busy in catching and considering their teacher's words to be able to lift up their hearts to God. And so too will it be with the common run of teachers themselves. Either they will be always repeating the same kind of petitions in the same kind of language, till they become as well known to their hearers as any set forms could be; or else, while they try to be new and striking, they will too often become absurd, if not irreverent.

hymn, after which the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament were read aloud, but at first, as they were subject to interruptions from the heathen, in no settled portions, as was afterwards the case. The lessons were read for the first two hundred years by the deacons; but afterwards in many places were separate persons appointed, called readers. Before the lesson began, as before most other parts of the service, one of the clergy saluted the people, saying, "Peace be with you," to which they commonly answered, "And with thy spirit." Then the lesson was given out, and before the reader began, he cried aloud, in order to gain the more attention: "Thus saith the Lord." And if it was from one of the Gospels, all stood up to hear it. Between each lesson came a psalm, or in some places a prayer; and certain psalms were appointed to be always read at certain times. The sixty-third, for instance, was called the morning psalm, because it was used in that service, just as the ninety-fifth is with us, whilst in the afternoon the hundred and forty-first psalm was repeated. When the public worship had proceeded so far, the sermon came next, which was not commonly allowed to be preached by deacons, but only by bishops or priests. It was preceded by a short prayer, accompanied by the usual form of salutation between the minister and his flock, and was always concluded with a giving of glory to the Holy Trinity, as we still do. In one respect ancient

custom in this part of the service was just the contrary of the present practice. Now the congregation sit, while the preacher is standing; then the preacher sat, while the congregation stood and listened to him:—this rule, however, was not universally observed. One very disorderly practice deserves our notice, which is, the custom of bestowing open marks of applause on any sermon that was liked. So, we are told, did the people applaud the preaching of St. Chrysostom*, whose name must be familiar to most of us, since we have often joined in his beautiful prayer repeated at the end of both our morning and evening services: “Some tossed their thin garments, others moved their plumes, others laid their hands on their swords, and others waved their handkerchiefs and cried out, ‘Thou art worthy of the priesthood, thou art the thirteenth apostle, Christ has sent thee to save our souls!’” Such scenes were more becoming a theatre than a place of worship, and every one must own that, in this respect, things are done more “decently and in order” in our own times than they were about four hundred years after the coming of Christ†. Tears and groans were

* This good and able bishop was so beloved and admired by his people, that when he was sent into banishment, the crowds, as he went along, lamented, and said that “it was better that the sun should not shine, than that John Chrysostom should not preach.”

† We are also improved in another much more important respect. All that is said above of the preaching chiefly regards the town-churches. There were very few churches in the

another mode of showing the effect of the preacher's words, but even these, however suitable if they are in earnest and produce good effects, are too likely in some men to give rise to mere show and hypocrisy. "You praise the *preacher* of the word," says St. Austin; "but *I* desire the *doer* of it." Those praises he calls but the leaves of the tree, and says he would not be praised by men leading ill lives, which would be a grief, and not a pleasure to him. He cannot say that he would not be praised by men leading good lives. "What then," he adds, "shall I say? I do not desire it, for fear of being insnared by human praise; I do not utterly refuse it, for fear of being ungrateful to those to whom I preach." Before we finish the subject of sermons we may observe, that, as with us at present, some neglected them, and indeed, the service altogether, whilst others reckoned the sermon to be every thing. "Why should I go to church," was their question, "if I cannot hear a preacher?" According to St. Chrysostom's strong way of speaking, "this one thing had ruined and destroyed all religion." "The necessity for a preacher arises only from our sloth and ignorance," says he. "All things are clear and open in the Holy

country, and they were badly and irregularly supplied with preachers, from necessity. In England, every village has, at least, once in a week, a sermon preached within its humble church. In early times the villages had neither churches nor ministers, and hence *pagans*, or villagers, grew to mean the same as heathens.

Scriptures, all things necessary are plainly revealed." After some further reproof he goes on, 'Oh, but,' say they, 'we have the same things read to us every day out of Scripture*.' And do you not hear the same things every day in the theatre? Have you not the same sight at the horse-race? Are not all things the same? Does not the same sun rise every morning? Do you not eat the same meat every day?" Then having shown that such persons, though always hearing the same Scriptures, were far from being masters of them, he finishes by asking whether, since the sermons contained something new, they attended to these. "In no wise," he declares. "And if we ask you, Why do you not remember them?—ye reply, How should we, seeing we hear them but once? If we say, Why do you not remember the Scriptures?—ye answer, They are always the same!"

When the sermon was finished, and the unbelievers had withdrawn from the church, the common prayers began with a supplication for those that were preparing for baptism. To every single petition of this prayer the congregation added the words, "Lord, have mercy upon them;" and after this the catechu-

* It would seem that Chrysostom sometimes wearied certain of his hearers by preaching often on the same subject. It is said that when he made several sermons against swearing, he was asked when he would choose some other topic. "When you leave off swearing," replied he, "I will leave off preaching against it."

mens received the bishop's blessing, if he was present, before they departed. Prayers for other persons, especially for those possessed with unclean spirits, and those now ready to be baptized, and likewise for penitents, followed next in order; and so ended the first part of the service, to which the Christian learner, though not yet baptized, was admitted. When this was over, the service of the faithful, or communion-service, commenced.

As the forms of this differed in different ages and places among the early Christians, it may be well to notice only the most remarkable of them. A private prayer breathed in silence* by each particular person was often used at the beginning of this service†, after which came a public one for the whole Church of Christ, and indeed for all mankind. This was offered by the deacon and people kneeling, and was followed by a *collect*, (so called because the heads of the former prayers were here *collected* together,)

* In the fourth age after Christ, when religion was beginning to lose its purity, and grow corrupt, Chrysostom blames some, who, not knowing what manner of spirit they were of, made these prayers a means of sin, by giving utterance in them to such wishes as these: "Revenge me of mine enemies, O Lord, and show them that I have a God." How that father could get at the knowledge of these secret prayers it is not easy to say, unless the parties themselves declared what they contained.

† Such a silence, the impressive effect of which can hardly be forgotten by any one who has ever witnessed it, is observed by our own Church in the service for the Ordering of Deacons and Priests.

which was repeated by the bishop, all standing. After this a collection was made, to which each gave according to his ability, and out of which the bread and wine for the sacrament were furnished. According to the common mode of drinking wine in ancient times and warm climates, water was mixed with it before it was used*. The deacon then brought water in which the bishop or priest washed his hands before he consecrated the bread and wine; and then all present were commanded, in token of their love and good-will to each other, to give or receive the kiss of peace†, the clergy saluting the bishop, the laymen their fellow-laymen, and women one another. Another general prayer then followed, after which the priest again saluted the people by saying, "The Lord be with you," and they returned in the usual way. He then went on to say, "Lift up your hearts;"—"We lift them up unto the Lord," was their reply. "Let us give thanks unto the Lord," returned the priest.—"It is meet and right so to do," added the people. Then came what was called the great thanksgiving for all blessings, and the hymn of the che-

* By some heretics water instead of wine was ordered to be used in the Lord's Supper. A very general dislike of wine has from the earliest ages prevailed in some parts of the East, and Mahomet in forbidding that liquor did but flatter such old prejudices against its use.

† See 1 Pet. v. 14, and 1 Thess. v. 26. This, though so ancient a custom, beautiful in itself, and founded on Scripture, was in the course of time abused, and therefore laid aside,

rubim, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts, heaven and earth are full of thy glory!" was sung. The bread and wine were afterwards consecrated by a prayer that always contained an account of the first appointment of the sacrament, and a prayer to God to sanctify the gifts by His Holy Spirit. This was repeated with a loud voice, and the bread was commonly broken, in order to set forth the breaking of Christ's body. The communicants then partook both of the bread and wine; indeed it is allowed by some of the Roman Catholics, (who deny the cup to the laity,) that theirs was *not* the practice during the first *twelve* ages after Christ. They generally received the elements either standing or kneeling. The form of giving them seems at first to have been merely, "The body of Christ," and "The blood of Christ," to each of which, as he took the bread or cup, the receiver answered, "Amen." While they were partaking, it was usual to sing a psalm, (commonly the thirty-third, or forty-fifth,) and when they had done, after some further prayers and thanksgivings, the bishop blessed them, and then the deacon sent them away with these words, "Go in peace." The Lord's Supper was administered in a place fenced in by rails surrounding a table of wood or stone, outside of which were all except the clergy. In short their arrangements in this respect were much the same as our own are.

The bread and wine were sometimes sent home to

those that were sick, or unable to come to church. If any part of the consecrated elements remained over and above what was wanted, it was not reserved in the early Church, as in the Church of Rome, to be made the object of superstition and folly*, but was either consumed on the spot, or else given to Christian children, or, otherwise, burnt†, unless, as was sometimes done, it was kept by the priest to save the trouble of a fresh consecration on some other occasion. As to the offerings of the faithful, some portion of them was employed in the support of the clergy, and another portion was spent in the feasts of love, or Agapæ, as they were called, in which the rich and the poor met together at the same table; but these simple and innocent feasts were by degrees abused, till at length they were discontinued.

In conclusion of this part of our subject we may listen to some remarks of St. Chrysostom concerning the preparation suitable for the Lord's Supper, which, long as they have been written, have as yet lost none of their usefulness. "Is it not absurd," says he, "to

* It is to guard against such absurdity that our Church orders that the bread and wine "shall not be carried out of the church" after it has been consecrated. See the Rubric at the end of the Communion-service.

† If the early Christians had believed, as the Romanists now believe, that the bread and wine are the real body and blood of Christ, they would never, any more than the Romanists would now, have allowed these elements to have been cast into the fire and destroyed.

spend so much care upon bodily things, as that, when a festival approaches, you will bring your best clothes out of your wardrobe, and make them ready many days before, and buy your shoes, and prepare a more splendid table, and think of many ways to deck and adorn yourself ; but in the mean time have no regard for your soul, which lies neglected in filth and uncleanness, ready to perish with famine, and overrun with iniquity ? How absurd is it to present the body here finely adorned, but your soul naked and vilely clothed ! when yet none sees your body except your fellow-servants, but your soul is closely viewed by the Lord, who will severely punish your neglect of it."

It now remains only to notice a few of the customs and manners of the early Christians, that were connected with their public worship. There is no proof of any distinguishing dress being used by the clergy till the fourth century after Christ, when we know that white garments, or surplices, as we call them, were commonly worn. One posture usual in those times during prayer was with the hands raised upwards and stretched out, in resemblance of the mode in which our Saviour's arms were stretched out upon the cross. Sitting was never allowed as a posture proper for devotion, but, as on a week-day it was customary for Christians to kneel at prayers, so on Sundays they always prayed standing ; the former was to represent their fall by sin, the latter their

resurrection or restoration to an upright state by their Lord's return on the first day of the week from the grave. One of the early fathers cautions persons against extravagant actions or manners in putting up their prayers to the throne of grace. Our gesture and countenance ought to bespeak humility and modesty. He says also that we should be careful not to pray in so loud a tone of voice as to disturb the devotions of those near us*. It is not by reason of the strength of our lungs that our prayers reach the ear of the Almighty.

- . The first day of the week (Sunday) was considered by the early Christians a day of great enjoyment and rejoicing. Nothing but necessity could keep them from joining in the public services of the Church, and the fact that they were shut out from these made their sicknesses more burdensome, and formed the chief grievance of their banishments or imprisonments. In the year 325, certain women who had been led away to keep meetings apart from the Church were censured, and it was forbidden for any one to "teach that the house of God and the assemblies held in it are to be despised, or that any man should take upon him, without the presence of the priest, or leave of the bishop, to preach at home."

* This hint is worth attending to; but had the author of it lived in our days he would have had to blame a very opposite fault.

As Saturday was the Sabbath-day at first appointed by Heaven, it was always kept with great attention among the early Christians : only in the East it was celebrated as a festival, while the Western churches kept it as a fast. And even among these last there was a difference in this point, for at Milan it was considered to be a feast*. An old lady coming thither was troubled with this departure from her usual notions, and complained to Ambrose, bishop of that city. His reply was a very sensible one. "When I come to Rome," said he, "I fast on the Saturday, as they do at Rome ; when I am here, I do not fast. So likewise you, to whatever church you come, observe the custom of that place, if you mean not either to give or take offence." From this answer, which quite satisfied the inquirer, it is said that the common proverb of "doing at Rome what they of Rome do" takes its rise. Every true Christian will delight in applying this rule to things indifferent, while he will shrink with scorn from the mere thought of applying it to things that are not so ; and between these his Bible will, with the Divine blessing, teach him rightly to distinguish. The very same Christian feeling that forbids us from striving about what is of no consequence, bids us yield up our life rather than our prin-

* Here we may note that at this time Rome was not the mistress and guide even of all the Italian churches, much less, as she claims to be, of all the churches in Christendom. Milan, in fact, was not at all subject to her, but was perfectly independent.

ciples. Of old it was said, with reference to the sinful customs of certain nations, that, "in Parthia the Christians, though Parthians, had no more than one wife ; nor in Persia, though Persians, did they marry their own daughters ; nor among the Bactrians, or Galli, did they violate the sacredness of marriage ; nor, wherever they were, did they suffer themselves to be overcome by badly-formed laws or manners." And thus we see, that when they of Rome do *wrong*, we cannot, as Christians, make this saying an excuse for doing so too.

There is one more subject which must be noticed with regard to the manner in which Divine worship was conducted among the early Christians,—and that is a very important one. If the question "By whom are their services performed ?" be asked respecting Christians at the present time, the answers will be almost as various as are the different sects and parties into which Christianity is divided. "By our bishops, priests, and deacons, the same clergy, called by the same names, and possessed of the same spiritual authority, as those of the early Church, to whom in regular order they have succeeded," would still be the answer of the great body of the Christians, and among them of the Church of England. Another much smaller but respectable body of Christians (the Presbyterians) will make much the same answer, only rejecting the bishops as successors of the apostles, and holding the perfect equality of all priests. A

third party, the Independents, carrying this principle still further, reject all three orders, and lay no claim to any authority for their ministers but what they receive from "a call" of the congregation which they are to serve. A fourth party, going still one step onwards in the system of rejecting what was anciently and universally received, has done away with the Christian ministry altogether; and among the Quakers one man is reckoned as fit to teach in their congregations as another, so long as he can lay claim to a certain share of the Spirit, and is not of bad moral character:—nay, they have even gone so far as to open the mouths of those whom St. Paul commanded to keep silence in the churches. There are, too, other sects which have a ministry indeed in name, although it is much the same as no ministry, because any one who will may take it upon him*. Where all are, or may be, teachers, there is little or no real

* "Ministering grace consists not in a self-appointment and designation, for no man taketh this honour to himself but he that is called of God," (Heb. v. 4, 5,) as Aaron and his sons were under the Old Testament; and in the New, even "Christ glorified not Himself," but was authorized by "the Father, when the voice from Heaven ordained Him to the work of preaching and teaching, which grace he gave to the apostles, and they to their successors, and these deliver what they have received from one to another to the end of time." If those who take the office of the ministry upon themselves say they are "called of God," we may ask where are we bidden to follow these new self-witnessed calls rather than the old authorized ministry descending to us from the apostles? We must "try the spirits, whether they be of God."

teaching, because there are very few to learn. Such is the present state of affairs,—so different among different parties are the opinions regarding the office of a Christian teacher. It is easy to suppose a really humble-minded and religious man desirous of being taught in the truths of the Gospel by one who has “authority,” (Titus ii. 15,) and willing to “obey them” that ought to “have the rule over” him as ministers of God. (Heb. xiii. 17.) And to such a person it may be some comfort, among so many self-appointed teachers, to show him those whose authority came at first from the apostles, was owned universally by the early Church, and was never denied by any body of Christians, however they might differ on other points, till more than fifteen hundred years after the birth of Christ. The three orders of bishops, priests*, and deacons, composed the Christian clergy from the first; and in this respect the Church of old was more happy than it now is; those that dissented from it, did so because they could not receive its doctrines; no one then ever thought of tearing himself away from the Church of Christ, as

* These are sometimes called elders in the New Testament. (1 Tim. v. 17, &c.) Sometimes they are called bishops, or overseers of Christ’s flock. (Acts xx. 28.) Just as when a child is brought into the world he is nameless, so when new things or fresh offices arise among men, they are at first without a name; and afterwards by degrees some distinguishing term is applied to them. In this way there were *bishops*, in our meaning of the word, from the first, but the word was not at first entirely confined to them.

men now do, who express their agreement with its doctrines, but declare their dislike of those names and offices of its clergy which have come down to it from the days of Paul and Titus. To thinking persons, the following short and necessarily imperfect account of the opinions and practice of the very first Christians in regard to their clergy, may perhaps be the means of improvement in this respect. When they see the care taken of old that no one should "preach, except he were sent," (Rom. x. 15,) they will feel less willing to attend the preaching of those who are self-sent, or else sent by such as have no authority to supply the vineyard of the Church with labourers; they will not henceforth let idleness, or itching ears, or mere whim, pass as a reason for preferring the meeting-house to the Church; they will see that the only excuse for forsaking the latter is a conscientious difference from the doctrines taught there,—that such as forsake it because of its having in it bishops, priests, and deacons, might for the very same reason have left the Church of the apostles to themselves.

The power* of the early Bishops of Christ's Church was briefly this :—First, Whatever they did, whether

* We must always bear in mind that this, their *spiritual* power, has nothing whatever to do with any wealth or honours bestowed upon them by the state. For example, at this very time the Scotch bishop, who, *as such*, gets from a *charitable fund* sixty or seventy pounds a year, and has his congregation to serve like a common clergyman, is just as much a bishop, and of just the same power in the sight of the Church, as is the Archbishop of Canterbury.

it was preaching, baptizing, or any other service, they did of their own authority under God, while the lower clergy did these same offices by an authority only committed to them by the bishops* :—Secondly, The bishops had the sole right of ordaining clergy, whether bishops, priests, or deacons, to feed the flock of Christ :—Thirdly, They had the power of governing the clergy, of guiding them in cases of doubt, and punishing them when they did what was wrong. As to the second order, the Priests, or Presbyters ; they had authority to perform all the offices of the Church, they were often consulted by the bishop upon matters of doubt or importance, and they were allowed to place their hands, along with his, upon the heads of those ordained to the ministry, a privilege still continued to them in our own Church. The third order, that of Deacons, was employed more about the lower offices of the Church. They were to take care of the vessels and such things belonging to the Lord's table, to collect the offerings of the people, to minister to them the bread and wine, (which they were never allowed to consecrate,) and in some places they were permitted to read the Gospel and to baptize. In

* In the same way as "the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is the man," (1 Cor. xi. 3,) so the head of the bishop is Christ, and the head of the other clergy is the bishop. Still as all, both men and women, must answer for their conduct before God, so too are all, whether bishops or other clergy, answerable to Him for what they do, and the way in which they do it.

general, however, they acted as assistants and servants of the higher clergy. Five-and-twenty was the lowest age for the ordination of a deacon, and thirty for that of the two other orders. After a due inquiry into the fitness of the parties with respect to talents, good life*, and so on, the office of a teacher in Christ's fold was always bestowed by the bishops with laying on of hands and with prayer. Such was, for the three first centuries after Christ, and for more than twelve hundred years after the close of these, the only door through which persons could be admitted into the Christian ministry. Of the regard paid in the early ages to the bishops, who could trace up their authority to the apostles at the distance only of a few generations, and of the respect shown to the clergy, who were by such authority ordained to preach the Gospel, numberless proofs might be brought. But one or two of the earliest, and therefore most valuable, of these must suffice. Clement of Rome, who was, when young, the "fellow-labourer" of St. Paul, wrote later in life an epistle to the Corinthians who were, it seems, as in St. Paul's time, at variance among themselves. Clement tells them that "Christ was sent by God, and the apostles by Christ; that these last, preaching the word through the country and the cities,

* The care taken in this respect by the early church is borne witness to by a heathen Emperor, Alexander Severus, who openly copied its example, and made the same kind of inquiry with regard to the character of those about to be appointed to public offices of trust.

appointed the first fruits of their labours (the first converts), men approved of by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should believe. They knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that strife would arise respecting the name of the office of bishop, and therefore, having perfect fore-knowledge, they appointed those named above, and afterwards made them pastors, so that, after their death, other men that were approved might succeed to their ministry." Lastly, in speaking to the authors of the disorders in the Corinthian Church, he bids them to be subject to the elders, and bending the knees of their hearts to learn repentance; to put away the boasting and proud self-sufficiency of their tongues, and learn to be obedient; "for," continues he, "it is better for you to be found in Christ's fold, small but esteemed, than to be cast out from its hope, seeming to be of greater consequence than others." Polycarp*, not long after, writing to the Philippians, tells them "to be subject to the priests and deacons, as to God and Christ†," and at the same time urges their ministers to perform with zeal their respective duties. Ignatius, at much about the same time, which was something more than a hundred years after the birth

* For an account of the martyrdom of Polycarp, see p. 66; and for that of Ignatius, see p. 64.

† By advising them "to be subject to the priests and deacons, as to God and Christ," the good father meant only to lead them "with good will to do service, as to the Lord, and not to men." (Eph. vi. 7.)

of Christ, is very full upon this subject of order and Church-government. In one of the letters written by him to different Churches, just before he became a martyr to the truth, he bids them pray for his own city, which, having been deprived of him had then, he says, "only God for its shepherd, and Christ for its bishop." "Let us study," he elsewhere says, "obedience to the bishop, that we may be subject to God. And the more silent and gentle any one observes his bishop to be, the more on that account should he reverence him. Every one to whom the Master commits the stewardship should be received as the Master himself." And in another place he openly declares that "without the bishops and presbyters there is no Church."

Such were the opinions of three martyrs of Christ, one of them a friend of St. Paul, and the other two disciples of St. John; and such continued to be the opinion of the Church at large, during its hardest trials and its greatest purity. To be a bishop in those days, be it remembered, was no very desirable preferment, except for the zealous Christian; it was not from worldly motives that the office was made so much of by these good men. It was because they verily believed it to be of Divine authority that they said so much about it. And it is from the very same belief that so much is said about it here. "Surely it is," as it has been well said, "deserving of the most serious consideration among Christians, that the

chief subject with Clement and Ignatius is Church-union; the great object of their writings is to prevent persons from separating for slight pretences from their lawful teachers." If men like these, who had conversed with those apostles that had seen our Lord himself, thought the subject of so much consequence, is it for us to say that it is of no consequence at all, and to say so, as many do, without having hardly read or thought at all upon the matter? If they would not, had they lived in our times, have entered a meeting-house in order to join in its services, simply because those services are not performed by one who has been ordained by bishops, having authority* to do this delivered down to them from Christ through the holy apostles, shall we say that, (supposing the doctrine to be alike good in both places,) it matters not whether we go to a meeting-house or to church? If conscience forbids us to join in the service of the church, there may be reason for withdrawing from

* That our bishops have such authority may be made clear enough, if we will admit with the early Church that it was given by the apostles to those whom they ordained. It will not be said that any person could in the present day be received as a bishop, unless he had been lawfully ordained to that office. And we may safely ask at what former time this would have been at all more possible. But even if any one had falsely assumed that character, this would not have injured the Church, which has guarded against such danger from the very first, by requiring no less than *three* bishops to ordain a member of their own order. So that, unless all three were mere pretenders, there must have been in every ordination of this kind, men who had received authority in the Church, and had a right to hand it down to others.

it and going elsewhere ; otherwise shall we “ separate ourselves,” shall we cease to “ walk by the same rule” with the bishops and martyrs of the early Church, merely because we fancy the preacher that is not in holy orders, and do not fancy him that is* ? or because the meeting-house is close to our home, while the church is half a mile distant, or for some reason not at all better than these ? To finish this subject, which has already been drawn out to so great a length, though much more might be said upon it, we may make use of the words of a very sensible writer. “ Nothing but necessity can justify any one meddling with these offices who is not appointed by a bishop†. If it be said that this was not the *only* method instituted by the apostles, it concerns those who affirm this to show that the apostles appointed some other. This is acknowledged to be a method appointed by the apostles ; and unless it can be proved that they appointed also some other, this must appear

* Nothing can be more “ carnal” or more common than such fancies respecting individual preachers.

† Let not this be thought the doctrine only of some “ bigoted High-Churchman.” The illustrious Calvin, the great father of the Dissenters has said, “ If they would present unto us a hierarchy in which bishops should so rule as that they refuse not to submit themselves to Christ, as that they depend on Him as their only Head, and be referred to Him, then surely they that will not reverently and with the greatest obedience submit themselves to that hierarchy, if any such there should be, I confess there is no anathema of which they are not worthy.”—Calvin, quoted by the Bishop of Calcutta, in his tract, “ The Apostolical Commission considered.”

to be the only one by them appointed ; and this appointment must appear unalterable (cases of necessity excepted), unless it can be shown that they declared it alterable, and left authority with some persons to alter it." And, it may be added, supposing that some will not confess the three orders of bishops, priests, and deacons ever to have been appointed by the apostles, but will have it that these left it all open to every body's fancy, all we can say to such persons is this : If *they* are right, the universal witness of the earliest Christian writers is good for nothing,—the whole history of the Church in the first ages might just as well have been lost. If *they* are right, they know more of the mind of the apostles than did those who had conversed with them,—nay, more, it will seem to most men, than the apostles knew of their own minds ! Lastly, If *they* are right, they are wiser than the whole Church from the death of Christ to the sixteenth century ever pretended to be ; wiser, too, than the greatest and best-informed Christians have ever pretended to be since that time* !

* Should it be said that the period named above contains some of the darkest and most corrupt ages of the Christian Church, it must be remembered that it contains also its purest and most enlightened ages,—those that immediately followed the times of the apostles. Persons who forget that there is a Christian priesthood, with which Christ always has been, and always will be, according to His promise, "even to the end of the world," would do well to consider the advice of an ancient writer : "When we are lifted up and swell against the clergy, then the

cry is that ~~we are~~ all upon one common level, and one is a priest ~~as~~ well as another. Take them at their word,—and let that conduct and discipline be insisted on which suits the character, the priestly robes are laid aside with great content. If the laity are in earnest, and zealous of the noble gift, or certain that they have it, let it be discovered by a life that is worthy of it, a life of holiness and unspotted purity.”

CHAPTER VII.

VIRTUES AND MANNERS OF THE EARLY
CHRISTIANS.

BEFORE the knowledge of the truths of the Gospel had spread much among the wealthy and great, and even some time after it had gained ground among these classes, so long as it continued to bring down trials and sufferings upon those who followed after it, the Christian character was remarkable for many virtues, the very opposite of what the heathens considered to be virtues. And indeed, even in the present state of things, when all, however unworthy, are Christians in name, we shall find those that are Christians indeed marked by the same disregard for worldly things, the same temperance, soberness, and chastity, the same humbleness of mind, and the same courage and patience in all afflictions, as distinguished the first believers in the name of Christ. A few instances of these virtues, (which, though they make but little show in the world, are of great price in the sight of God,) as they were displayed by the early Christians, may be at once interesting and improving. One cause which freed them from many temptations under which they might otherwise have fallen, was their total disregard for worldly matters. It was not merely the saying of one of their teachers, but the principle upon which they acted, that "what

related to the spirit was their own, while what related to the world was another's,—a thing in which they had no interest." When Agatha, a virgin martyr, was asked, why, being the child of such rich and noble parents, she would stoop to such low and mean offices as she took upon her*, she replied, "Our glory and our nobility lies in this,—that we are the servants of Christ." When the emperor Domitian was told that there were some of Christ's kindred remaining in Judea, he being, like Herod, afraid of the seed of David, ordered them to be brought before him. They were grandsons of St. Jude, who is called one of the brethren of the Lord, (Matt. xiii. 55,) and upon their confessing themselves to be of the race of David, they were asked what were their possessions. They said that they had among them about thirty-nine acres of land, out of the produce of which they paid their tribute, and supported themselves by their own labour, in proof of which they showed Domitian their hands, all rough and hardened with toil. He then asked them about Christ and the state of His kingdom, and when they said that it was not of this world, but heavenly and angelical, the emperor, cruel monster as he was, nevertheless let them go without hurting them, thinking them beneath his notice†. And

* It was customary for zealous Christian women to attend upon the martyrs in prison, and minister to their wants.

† It may be observed, that those called in Scripture *brethren* of our Lord are generally supposed to have been his *cousins*, to which relations that name was often applied by the Jews.

long after this, in the fourth century from Christ, when the Church was growing more worldly-minded, there were not wanting some who still were ready, if called upon, contentedly to forsake all for the truth's sake. Gregory of Nazianzum had been elected Bishop of Constantinople, but some noisy persons raised an opposition against him which caused much division in the assembly. Seeing this, he stood up, and begged the bishops, as preachers of peace to others, not to fall out among themselves; adding, "If I am the Jonas that raises the storm, throw me into the sea, and let these storms and tempests cease." And upon this he freely resigned his bishopric*. A heathen, and a great despiser of the Christians, has borne the following valuable witness to their disregard of worldly things. "It is not to be believed what expedition they (the Christians) use, when any of their friends are known to be in trouble. In a word, they spare nothing upon such an occasion;—for these miserable men have no doubt they shall be immortal and live for ever; therefore they despise death, and many surrender themselves to sufferings.

* Gregory, in the case above stated, acted according to the principles of Clement of Rome, the "fellow-labourer" of St. Paul, who says in his epistle to the Corinthians:—"Who then amongst you is of a noble spirit? who is compassionate? who is full of charity?—let him say, If on my account sedition, and strife, and divisions arise, I will leave the country; I will go whithersoever you please, and will do what the people order me, only let the fold of Christ with its appointed priests be in peace."

Moreover, their first lawgiver has taught them that they are all brethren, when once they have turned and renounced the gods of the Greeks, and worship this Master of theirs who was crucified, and engage to live according to His laws. They have also a sovereign contempt for all the things of this world, and look upon them as common."

Nor was it only in respect of riches, or honour, or power, that the first believers cared not for the things of this world ; they were ready quietly to give up the most endearing ties, if such was the Divine will. We read of mothers exhorting their children, and wives their husbands, in the midst of the fiery trials of martyrdom, to continue faithful even unto death. Origen, a person afterwards famous in the Christian world for his learning and writings, was quite a youth, when a dreadful persecution began, in which his father was a sufferer. The earnest wish of the young man was to become a martyr himself, but with great difficulty his mother contrived to disappoint in this respect his overflowing zeal. However, whilst his father was yet alive in the prison, Origen wrote him a letter with this simple, touching exhortation : " Beware, father, that you do not change your mind on our account." Such advice was not needed, as the father patiently endured death in a short time afterwards. Another story is told of a Christian lady, who, while her husband was lying dead, was suddenly deprived of two of her sons ; and when every one expected from her

signs of the most violent grief, she stood still, and at last, falling down, as it were, at the feet of Christ, only said : " Lord, I shall serve thee more quickly and readily, by being eased of the weight thou hast taken from me." It is said of Constantius, who, though not altogether a Christian emperor, was almost 'one, that he made this experiment. He ordered that all the officers and great men of his court should either sacrifice to the gods or else quit his service. Some of the Christians, to save their places, complied with this command, whilst others were firm, and would not give way. Upon this the shrewd emperor made his scheme known, and rewarded those who had continued resolute, but turned the others away, telling them that men who were false to their God would never be true to their king. It is in this way that we are tried by Heaven. Often does it seem so plainly for our present good to bend to circumstances, and depart somewhat from the strict line of duty, that men are apt to be misled into this sin. But as it proved with Constantius, so much more surely will it prove with God. He will sooner or later show us, either by rewarding our steadfastness or punishing our want of steadfastness, that, after all, honesty is the best policy, and the strait path of virtue the best and nearest way to the blessings we all desire. Urged at once by the strong warnings against worldly-mindedness to be found in Scripture, and also lifted up above the world by their hard lot, which gave them

very little whereon to fix their hearts, the Christians cared not for earthly things ; such, at least, was their general character. " Suppose they have lost whatever they have possessed," says St. Augustin, " have they lost their faith ? have they lost their piety ? have they lost the goods of the inner man, which is rich before God ? These form the wealth of the Christians ; and the apostle himself, rich in these, said that ' godliness with contentment is great gain.' " (1 Tim. vi. 6.) Augustin then tells a story of Paulinus his friend, who was Bishop of Nola, and had spent all his substance in works of charity. It happened that Nola had been taken and plundered by the Goths, and Paulinus then, as he afterwards told St. Augustin, prayed to God, who knew where all his treasures were laid up, that he would not suffer him to undergo torture for silver and gold. It was a common thing in those days to torture persons supposed to be rich, in order to make them discover their wealth. This some refused to do, and Augustin admonishes those that would endure so much for their money, to learn how much they ought to endure for Christ's sake. Another Christian writer tells us, that " we are not sent into the world to regard the things that are made, but to contemplate, that is, to regard with our minds, the Maker of all things. And therefore should any one ask a really wise man for what purpose he was born, he will boldly and readily answer that it was for the purpose of worshipping God, who has created us that we

may serve Him." Wealth is by another compared to a serpent, which, if a man knows how to handle it, will not hurt him, but, if he does not, it will twist itself round and injure him. And elsewhere he says, "Behold in Elijah the Tishbite a noble example of frugality, when he sat under the juniper-tree, and the angel brought him food. That food was a cake baked on the coals, and a cruse of water; such was the meal sent him by God himself." (1 Kings xix. 6.)

Next to their freedom from worldly feelings, the extreme temperance of the early Christians was a chief mark to distinguish them from the heathens. Indeed, as we shall afterwards see*, in many feelings, they carried their notions too far, and forbade as sinful even a moderate use of those good things provided for our comfort and enjoyment in this life. But for the present it is our more pleasing task to notice their moderation, so far only as it was praiseworthy. In a time of persecution (A. D. 177), we read of two martyrs; one of whom was very strict in his diet, never heretofore having accustomed himself to anything beyond bread and water. And this spare diet he continued in prison, till, as it is said, it was declared to his fellow-sufferer that he was not right in abstaining from God's creatures, and thereby giving occasion of offence to some. Being thus admonished by his friend, the too careful Christian from that time partook without distinction of all food, giving thanks to God.

* See Chapter VIII.

Clement, one of the early fathers, has said a great deal upon the folly of those who, instead of eating in order to live, live only in order to eat. Such persons, he says, seem to him to be all jaws ; "it it unreasonable," he afterwards adds, "and useless, and not even human, to be fattened like cattle for the slaughter, to be looking downwards to the earth, and for ever leaning over tables supplied from the earth." He condemns in the same way an over-indulgence in wine, by which the body, like a wrecked vessel, is lost, while the mind, which is the pilot, is overcome with its effects. But it was not so much by their freedom from gluttony or intoxication that the Christians were so honourably distinguished from their heathen neighbours, as by their temperance in a still more important point. The law of the Gospel of Christ, in complete agreement with the law of nature, as well as with the voice of reason, allows every man to be joined to his own wife, and every woman to her own husband (1 Cor. vii. 2); and beyond this any other connexion is strictly forbidden. Nothing could be more opposed than this to the looseness of morals then general among the heathens ; but, although to some of the new converts it might seem a hard commandment, it was nevertheless obeyed by them for the Lord's sake ; and the most happy consequences have flowed from it. In nearly all heathen countries one half of the human race has been kept in a state very little better than that of the brutes that perish, as slaves to the will of the

other half. And as the surest way to improve a nation is to raise the character of its female population, so is a community certain to be debased, if that portion of it is degraded.

Such was the state of society in the heathen world. Men knew not the meaning of the word "home;" they had scarcely any notion of the charms which that word conveys to our minds. It is to Christianity that we owe, among numberless other benefits, the sweets of home and all its comforts, for it is Christianity that has restored to man that "help meet" for him, whose smiles and affections form the chief source of its enjoyments, that partner whom God had given him at the first, but who had afterwards been sunk, by his own evil passions, to the degraded state of a miserable slave. "The end of the law," says Clement, "is to lead us from unrighteousness to righteousness by means of chaste marriages, and the birth of children, and a holy life." And any unfaithfulness on the part of those whom God had joined together was punished in the severest manner by the infant Church. In consequence of this strictness and holiness, the Christian women soon became at once the greatest ornaments and supports of the truth. "What women have they among the Christians!" was the admiring exclamation of a heathen, who had never thought the female character at all capable of such virtues as he saw drawn from it under the Gospel. It

has been observed, quaintly perhaps, but truly, that when our Lord was nailed to the cross, there were *three* Maries, and but *one* John, at the foot of it. The heathen emperor Julian bears witness to the service done by the more tender sex to the cause of truth, when he reproaches the people of Antioch for allowing their wives to give away everything to the Galileans, as he always called the Christians in scorn. "They nourish from your means," exclaims he, "a parcel of beggars, and thus do they raise no small admiration among a numerous class,—such as need support,—for this godless religion." These were some of the good effects of the purity of manners set forth in the Gospel of Christ; and we may thankfully remember that we are still, however sad in some respects our corruptions may be, all enjoying the consequences of this blessed change. If we have not Christian mothers, or sisters, or partners ourselves, we live, thank God! in a land where these abound; and we cannot but share in the benefits which this circumstance produces by its general effect upon the tone and morals of society. Before we quit the subject, it may not perhaps be out of place to confirm what has been said by the following passage from the travels of a clergyman of our own Church in the East Indies. He arrived among some of the native Christians, "and," says he, "the people of the neighbouring villages came round me, women as well as men. The sight of the women assured me that I was

once more (after a long absence from England,) in a Christian country. For the Hindoo women and the Mahomedan women, and, in short, all women who are not Christians, are accounted by the men an inferior race : and in general are confined to the house for life, like irrational creatures. In every countenance now before me I thought I could discover the intelligence of Christianity*."

The next remarkable virtue in the character of the Christians of the first ages, is one hitherto unknown to their heathen neighbours and fellow-subjects, or at any rate, if known at all, known only as a thing to be despised and avoided. Humility with the heathen was considered meanness of spirit ; and of all the Christian graces they had the least notion of, and felt the least respect for, that which teaches a man to be lowly in his own eyes. All believers, of whatever age, are taught humility, both by the example and precepts of their Divine Master, but never was this lesson so generally or so completely acted upon, as it was in the first ages of Christianity. After the cruel persecutions at Lyons †, those who had escaped with their lives, though they had boldly confessed the truth, and bore upon their bodies the marks of their sufferings, would by no means allow themselves to be called martyrs by their brethren, so great was their

* Buchanan. *Christian Researches in Asia*, p. 116, *ed. London*, 1814.

† See p. 80.

feeling of humility. This name, they said, belonged only to Christ himself, and to those who had undergone death for His sake. As to themselves, they added, they were only poor humble confessors, and they besought their fellow-Christians to pray for them, that they might reach the perfect end of their course. It is said, that when the emperor sent for Origen, a Christian teacher of great note, to Rome, he offered him his choice of a mule or a chariot for his journey. But he refused both, saying that he was less than his Master, Christ, of whom he never read that he rode but once, and therefore he chose to go on foot*.

Another story, which, though rather long, is worth our notice, as it shows at once the spirit of the early ministers of religion, and the respect which they commanded even from the highest ranks, may serve to prove the power of that faith, which could force even a successful emperor to humble himself before its commands. In the year 379, some time after Christianity had become the established religion of the empire, Theodosius began his reign. He was a prince of many virtues, and being sincerely attached to the religion of Christ, his character forms a pleasing contrast to that of many who had gone before him,

* Very different from this was the spirit that generally prevailed among the heathens. It was, for instance, a custom with some of the Arabians to fasten a camel near the grave of a deceased person, and there leave the poor animal to perish; all which was done that its master might not suffer the disgrace of walking on foot in another world!

and of whose crimes we have heard so much*. Still this good emperor was not without his faults, and one of the worst of these was his extreme hastiness of temper. In order to give his passion time to cool, sometimes, when he felt angry, he would repeat the alphabet over to himself before he would come to any resolution. It happened (A. D. 390), that a riot had taken place at Thessalonica, a town in Macedonia, during which the commanding officer there was killed by the mob. The hasty emperor ordered the city to be destroyed, but Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, and others of the clergy, succeeded in persuading him to spare it. However, afterwards, he was induced by his minister of state, who thought that such an outrage should not go unpunished†, to change his mind again. The Thessalonians were invited to some public games, but when they expected the races to begin, a signal was given, and the soldiers, who had silently surrounded the place of assembly, fell upon them, and butchered them without the least mercy. This they continued to do for three hours, and at least 7000 persons, of every age and sex, whether natives of the place or merely strangers, perished on

* It is reported of this emperor, that he used to say, that he reckoned it a greater honour to be a member of the church of Christ than the head of the empire.

† It is justly remarked by Gibbon, that "the sentence of a dispassionate judge would have inflicted a severe punishment on the authors of the crime." But the extreme cruelty that followed made the guilty city an object of compassion with all men.

that melancholy day. It is said, that a foreign merchant offered all his wealth and his own life to save one of his two sons, and while he was in painful doubt which to select, his suspense was ended by the destruction of both. The emperor, meanwhile, had again altered his mind, and had sent messengers to recall his former cruel order, but it was too late. Soon after this deed of blood had been committed, Theodosius went to Milan; and upon this, Ambrose, having left the city, wrote to his earthly master, to reproach him with the crime of which he had been guilty against his Heavenly Master. We do not know how this letter was received, but soon afterwards, when the emperor attempted to attend Divine service at Milan, the bishop met him, and refused him admittance into the church*; reminding him, that his subjects whom he had destroyed, were his fellow-creatures, nay, his fellow-servants under God. The emperor, for want of a better defence, mentioned David, who had committed both murder and adultery. "You have resembled him in his crime," said Ambrose; "resemble him also in his repentance." The emperor yielded, and returning home, remained eight months suspended from the rights of Christian fellowship. Christmas was now coming, and the emperor

* We must bear in mind that the early Church was very strict in its government and discipline. Guilty members of it were shut out from its communion, for a longer or shorter time, according to the degree of their guilt, and not again admitted without much repentance and humiliation.

made a fresh attempt to be restored. Saddened at the thought of the season that was approaching, but in the celebration of which he was to have no share, he exclaimed to his minister, (who had advised the slaughter of the Thessalonians, and was then inquiring the cause of his grief,)—" Servants and beggars may freely enter to join in prayer, but against me the church-doors, and consequently the gates of heaven, are shut * ; for well I know what the Lord hath said, ' Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven†.' " (Matt. xviii. 18.) The minister was sent to Ambrose, and the impatient prince set out towards the church before he had returned. They met, and the ill-success of the message was reported to Theodosius, for the bishop had declared his resolution to suffer anything rather than give way. The emperor then

* This did not follow according to the ideas of the early Christians, who very properly held, that the sincere penitent, though never re-admitted into the church, might be received into heaven ; in other words, they did not presume to confine the power of the Almighty to " loose," that is, to forgive sins, to those cases only in which the Church had previously done this.

† These words form part of Christ's commission to His apostles, and of course the power hereby trusted to them is trusted on the supposition that they keep the terms of that commission. No power, therefore, is given them either to bind or to loose, except this be done according to the rules of the Gospel ; and, as in the case of Ambrose, within this limit their power is absolute. That it belongs also, within the same limits, to those successors of the apostles, with whom Christ has promised to be always, even to the end of the world, was the opinion of the first Christians, however unfashionable popish ambition and dissenting prejudices may have combined to render such an opinion in these days.

made up his mind to undergo the public shame which he had deserved, and hastening to Ambrose, agreed with him to make an open declaration of his repentance in the church, and to enact a law, that in future thirty days should be allowed to pass between any sentence touching life or property, and its execution, so that hastiness of temper should not again occasion such crimes. Theodosius, accordingly, publicly professed his sorrow and shame at what he had done, and was again received to the communion, having by his conduct set a good example of Christian humility, instead of adding (as many would have done) to his past sins, by using his royal power to force the ministers of Christ to be tender towards his transgressions. None but a Christian king would ever have borne such treatment from a subject ; and such humility on the part of a great emperor is no easy matter to practise. A thousand excuses of policy, expediency, and dignity, were to be completely silenced, before Theodosius could endure to enter, as he did, into the church, in the presence of the congregation, exclaiming, " My soul cleaveth unto the dust, quicken Thou me according to Thy word !" and falling upon the ground, and with tears begging pardon for his grievous offence of God, and of all good men. As to Ambrose, there is much to admire in his character, though still he was but a man, and therefore not free from faults *.

* Although the power of the king in our own country is very great over the Church and its rulers, still English history can

His zeal seems to have sometimes carried him too far, as was the case when he prevailed upon the emperor not to enforce the command given by him, that a Jewish synagogue which had been burnt by some Christians, should be restored at their expense.

Before we leave the consideration of the humility of the first believers, it may be well to notice what has already been touched upon,—their submission even to unjust rulers *. The same motive that made the great soldier, Theodosius, submit to the unarmed bishop, Ambrose, led in earlier times the willing martyrs to submit to their cruel heathen tyrants. They were Christians, and therefore they were obedient “for conscience-sake.” (Rom. xiii. 5.) In the accounts of the sufferings of the infant Church, we always find its members following the example of the apostles; while they nobly stand up for their rights, and calmly reprove the fierceness of their persecutors, still they submit without a murmur to the power of their

produce examples of bold and noble conduct on the part of some of our bishops. When that system of church-robbery was going on, which has *at this day* left, out of 10,701 livings in England and Wales, 1915 below the yearly value of 100*l.*, Archbishop Whitgift told his mind on this subject to “the British lion,” Queen Elizabeth; and spoke of her father King Henry’s sins in this respect, in such a way as few other men would have dared to do.

* See p. 14. It may be observed, that if we take the Christian practice in the first ages as a guide, we shall always mistrust the strength of that man’s religious feelings, whose knowledge of Scripture has not yet taught him, agreeably to its plainest precepts, to respect and obey the laws of his country.

enemies. Julian, whose witness, as he was a heathen, and a bitter foe to the Christians, may certainly be trusted, does them the justice to own, that if they saw any one rebelling against his prince, they directly punished him most severely. If there were any exceptions to the general humbleness of soul which marked the conduct of the early believers, it was chiefly among those that did not hold fast to the truth. As in our own times, so even from the very first, there were divisions among those that called themselves Christians. And then, just as it is now, men were often led away by a great outward show of holiness, and lofty pretences to religious superiority. The Gnostics, or *men of knowledge*, as they called themselves, (though in reality they were hardly to be called Christians,) were, according to their own showing, "the elect." The truth was completely smothered by their fables and lies; and yet they, forsooth, were saved by "knowledge," and therefore far above others who were saved only by "faith." They thought more highly of themselves than they did of the apostles; they were puffed up and boasting; they said that they were by nature sons of the supreme God, and so on. Other sects, too, of much more respectable claims, as the Montanists, for example, were so very lofty in their ideas, that they scorned almost every object of sense, as beneath their notice. Montanus, their leader, impiously gave himself out as the Comforter promised by Christ. His sect were the "spiritual," other Christians were

the mere "animal" believers. He was to give the finishing touch to the *hitherto imperfect* doctrines of the New Testament. Every thing like enjoyment, however harmless, was disapproved of by him. Extreme fasting, abstaining from marriage, refusal to fly from persecution and danger*, and, in short, uncommon strictness and harshness of temper in all things, raised the wonder and admiration of the vulgar, and even of better-informed persons, so that his followers had their day, and could for a while look down with spiritual pride on those less-aspiring Christians who were contented, without any fresh light, to follow the apostle's words, and "use the world," without, however, "abusing it." And it must be owned, that, in course of time, this strictness of manners (and consequent spiritual pride) spread itself among the whole body of Christians, and paved the way for many of the self-tormenting and yet self-satisfying, practices of the Roman Catholics;—practices tormenting to the bodily feelings, and yet satisfying to the pride of the heart, inasmuch as they were vainly thought to earn in some degree that salvation, which human nature is too often unwilling to receive as a free gift.

* Not only did the Montanists refuse to flee from danger, but they sometimes ran into it in a strange manner. They publicly foretold the downfall of the city and empire of Rome within the next hundred years, and upon this the Christian church, which had already felt enough of the weight of Roman power, withdrew from all connexion with a sect so vain and imprudent.

It is almost needless, after so much has been already said respecting the conduct of the Christian martyrs, to add any fresh proofs of the courage and patience of that church of which they showed themselves such worthy members. One more instance, however, may be brought forward here, as showing in the most striking manner the great trials which these virtues sometimes underwent, even in the brightest days of the early Church. During a time of general peace and tranquillity for Christians (A.D. 262), one Marinus, an officer, was a candidate for some further promotion, when he was accused on account of his religion, and for refusing to sacrifice to the emperor. He did not deny his faith, and three hours were allowed him for consideration ; during which time, the bishop of the place (Cæsarea) came to him, and taking him by the hand led him into the church. There, having placed him near the holy table, he put a sword on one side and a Bible on the other, bidding him take his choice of these two. The martyr had already made up his mind, and took hold of the Bible. Upon this the bishop said, " Hold fast, then, to God ; hold fast to Him, and, strengthened by Him, obtain what thou hast chosen, and go in peace." He accordingly returned, as his time was now expired, and received his crown of martyrdom with cheerful submission. The feelings of the harassed believers in those days may be summed up in the words of one who was himself a martyr. Cyprian, in the first work he wrote after he

became a Christian, having given a powerful description of the crimes and miseries of the world, ends with account of the fury of persecution, by which "for one man's body more torments than he has members are prepared. Who, then, shall come to our aid among such trials? Our friends?—they are false and deceitful. Our judges?—they corrupt justice by selling it. There is, then, one calm tranquillity that alone can be trusted; one, and only one, solid, and firm, and continual security; and that is, for a man to raise his eyes from the earth, and turn them upwards to heaven."

In complete agreement with the spirit of the Gospel which they had received, the first believers were distinguished by their practice of *charity*, taking the word in its widest sense. They were not only free in distributing their worldly goods to such as were in need, but they also abounded in love and good feeling to one another, and to all mankind. It is reported of St. John, that, when he was grown too old to preach any more to the people, he used to be led into the church, and then all he would say was this: "Little children, love one another." And as a reason for always repeating the same advice, he said that it was the command of the Lord, and that if they did this it was enough*. And the venerable apostle, though long since gone to his rest, still teaches

* The apostle did not mean to say, that the whole of religion was contained in this precept, but only the practical part of it in reference to our fellow-Christians.

the same lesson to the whole Church, in his first Epistle. St. John was himself an example of what he taught, and the tender love borne by him towards the souls of others is said to have been once shown in the following way. A certain youth whom he had chosen, and who had by his care been instructed and baptized, afterwards fell into a very bad course of life, till at last he became the captain of a company of robbers. St. John, returning after some time to the place, was so much troubled at hearing this, that he set off directly to the mountains where these outcasts of society were lurking. He was taken by one of their sentinels, and brought to their leader, who, however, no sooner saw who it was, than he fled away. St. John followed, but could not overtake him, till at length he prevailed upon him to stop, promising to pray for his peace and pardon with God. And in the end, says the story, the young man became a true penitent and convert to the Church. As to the bounty of the early Christians to all that were in need, we find many instances of it in the New Testament; and this good feeling was not, like many others, at all lessened in succeeding ages. Indeed, it is still to this very hour in full vigour in almost every Christian land, and the churches endowed with the means of supporting a preacher of the Gospel to the poor, the colleges, schools, hospitals, almshouses, and numberless other monuments of Christian bounty, which are scattered over our own country, furnish, every

step we take in it, some pleasing and convincing proof that it is inhabited by Christians. The emperor Julian confessed with shame that the *impious Galileans*, besides their own poor, supported those of the heathens, whom these last left in want of every thing. It is generally supposed by the most learned men, that, by the first believers "having all things in common" we are not to understand, that each person possessed of property sold it all, and himself became dependent on the common stock, but only that the *use* of such things as any one of them possessed was open, as far as they would go, to every brother Christian that was in want. It is a saying, that all things are common to friends, and in this sense, all things were common among the early Christians. And many of these, being Jewish converts, and knowing that our Lord's words, respecting the overthrow of Jerusalem,¹ would shortly be fulfilled, were likely enough to sell their estates, and apply the profits to acts of kindness. But we never hear of the Gentile converts doing so, and indeed we know that there were rich as well as poor among them, so that they, at any rate, could not have had all things in common*. Still, among them there was a general readiness to part with what they had, when it was needed by any of their brethren in the faith. Collections were made in one quarter of the world for persons dwelling

* See Rom. xii. 13; 1 Tim. vi. 17; James i. 9, 10; and many other passages.

in another*, between whom the single, but solid, bond of union was, that they were fellow-members of the Church, alike subject to Him who is the head of that body. The custom of making weekly collections for the poor was first begun in those times, and it has continued in many countries even to the present day. In England, since the poor-rate has been established, it has been discontinued ; but the box in which alms were received still remains in some of our churches. In Ireland, where there are yet no poor-rates, the weekly collection is still made ; and in the little islands of Jersey and Guernsey, the parishioners are reminded of the blessings attached to Christian benevolence by a small box fastened to the outside of each church, with this text generally over it : " He that hath pity upon the poor, lendeth unto the Lord ; and look, what he layeth out, it shall be paid him again." (Prov. xix. 17.) Upon the principle of the simple truth so beautifully expressed in this text, did the early Christians love to act. " Fear not," says Cyprian, " lest your property be swallowed up in deeds of charity, and you become poor. With regard to this point, be courageous, be quite at ease,—that cannot be consumed which supplies you with gifts for the use of Christ, and the means of performing a heavenly work."

It may furnish us with some insight into the

* See Acts xi. 29 ; 1 Cor. xvi. 2, &c.

strength of the character of the believer compared with that of him who has no hope, if we turn our attention to the conduct of the Christians at a time when, in common with their neighbours, they were feeling the weight of a national visitation. Such, for example, was the plague which spread itself all over the empire in the time of Cyprian (A. D. 252), and was especially fatal at Carthage, of which city he was bishop. Great numbers were carried off every day, and death attacked each house in turn. All were horror-struck, flying in order to escape the disease, or even wickedly exposing their suffering friends in the vain hope of shutting out death itself along with him who was just ready to die. In the mean time the whole city was strewed with corpses, imploring, as it were, pity, from the uncertainty how soon those yet alive might, in their turn, stand in need of some attention from others. But all was to no purpose; nobody cared for anything, unless it was to make a prey of them; nobody, trembling at the thought of a like fate, acted towards others as he would have wished another to act towards him, if in the same distress. In the midst of this universal misery the Christian bishop remained unmoved. He called his fellow-Christians together, and after instructing them in their duty on this awful occasion, he warned them not to confine their good offices to the Church alone, but to extend them, as God extends his rain and sunshine, to all, whether they believed

or not*. Arrangements were then made among the Christians, and they did every thing in their power to help their neighbours during this time of calamity. Those that could afford it gave their money, and such as could not gave what was still more valuable,—their personal help and assistance. Another trial of a like nature soon afterwards befell the Christians at Alexandria, and they behaved with the same virtue as those of Carthage. About the year 262 a plague was raging among them with extraordinary 'fury. The whole place was filled with mourning. There was no house without one death in it, and "oh," it is touchingly added, "that there had been but *one* in each house!" A short time before the disease broke out, the Christians had been allowed to return to the city, from which they had before been banished. Their bishop, who has given an account of the progress of the plague, does not pretend to say that they were spared any more than the heathens, but he shows in how very opposite a way the same trial was endured by these two classes. Many of the believers willingly exposed themselves to such risk in attending the sick as to lose their own lives, a kind of death, as it is truly said, inferior neither in piety nor firmness of mind to that of the martyrs. Such men, having faithfully performed the last sad offices to

* We must not forget, if we would do justice to Cyprian's charity, that this plague happened between two cruel persecutions, in the last of which that holy man himself suffered.

their suffering brethren, were often quickly called out of an evil world themselves, to follow the same path of peace which those had already trodden. Whereas the conduct of the heathens was just the reverse of this. Thrusting out such as were seized with sickness, they fled away even from those that had been dearest to them ; leaving them half-dead in the streets, or casting them forth unburied, they shrunk from partaking in the terrors of that death which not all their pains and caution could enable them to escape. It is said that the conduct of the Christians on these trying occasions had such an effect upon the minds of some, as to lead them to embrace a religion which had proved itself so much better than their own in the time of trouble. If it be not wandering too far from the subject before us, we may turn our thoughts for a moment to the conduct of some of our own countrymen during the only pestilence within our memory, the only one, indeed, (thanks to the Almighty !) with which England has now for many years been visited. During the time of the cholera in 1832 it raged, as is well known, with fearful power at Bilston in Staffordshire, destroying in about seven weeks one-twentieth part of the inhabitants. During this scourge, the Christian spirit showed itself in some as nobly as it did of old at Carthage and Alexandria, and in no one did it appear more so than in the clergyman of the parish, the Rev. W. Leigh. Amongst others, a striking proof of the power of Christianity upon the heart,

in such times of trial and distress, was given by a poor woman of the name of Bayley. Her brother-in-law and his family all perished, except an infant at the breast, and a boy of three years old. The infant found a mother, as long as it lived, in Mary Bayley, who nourished it along with her own babe ; and the poor boy found under her roof a home. Before this devoted family perished, when no person but herself ventured to approach their dwelling, she "made all their beds in their sickness," and actually laid out each of them on the bed of death. She was herself attacked with the disease, but her life was mercifully spared her. Nor were there wanting, even in a Christian land, examples of heathen brutishness during this affliction. For instance, a man, aged sixty, who was hired to help in digging the numerous graves then required, had uttered the dreadful wish that "the job might last six months longer." In eight-and-forty hours after this wish had been allowed to escape from his lips, he was himself lowered down into a grave, dug by his own hands, and, as he vainly thought, for some other person* !

But to return to the early Christians. It was said by one of them, that "a man becomes like unto God by doing good and being in want of as few things as possible, since God is without any wants." And this was the principle upon which almost all of them acted. They made use of whatever goods they pos-

* Leigh's Account of the Cholera at Bilston, p. 43 and 49.

sessed, as we have seen, for the kindest and most benevolent purposes ; and as for themselves, "having food and raiment, they were content therewith ;" indeed they seem to have thought anything beyond rather a burden to them than otherwise, or at least they considered it as a kind of trust, for the right use or neglect of which they would have one day to answer before the throne of God. Their poverty was a subject of endless scorn and reproach to them from the proud, worldly-minded heathens. We have already seen that the first believers were not earthly-minded, but this will by no means give us a sufficient notion of their greatness of soul. They rejoiced, they gloried in their poverty. "The charge that we are most of us poor," it was said, "is no reproach to us ; it is our boast. The soul is relaxed by abundance, and strengthened by necessity ; and yet how can a man without wants, coveting not his neighbour's goods, and rich towards God, be called poor ? He is rather a poor man, who, though he has much, wishes for yet more. To speak the truth, no one can be so poor as he was when he came into the world. The birds live without any possessions, and day by day are cattle fed in the fields, all which were born for our use, and we possess them all, if we desire them not. The less weight a man carries, the more pleasantly does he get on in his way ; and so in this journey of life, he who is eased by poverty has no burden of riches to groan under." A later writer,

treating of the same subject, says, that, "To be rich is one thing, to have plenty of money quite another thing. For we call the wise, the just, and the good, who have little or no money, rich men. These are rather rich in virtues, through which, even in actual want of bodily things, whatever they have is sufficient for them. But the covetous, who are always craving and wanting, we call poor men. For however, vast may be the abundance of their money, such persons, in the midst of all their abundance, cannot help being in want. God himself we rightly call rich, yet not in money, but in almighty power. We call wealthy persons rich, but if covetous, they are in regard to their minds really poor; and so those that have no money are called poor, but if wise, they are inwardly rich." Such was the just view taken by the Christians on this subject in the early ages; and considering that there were then many things tending to make riches a greater burden, and poverty a greater help, to Christians in their journey through life than these have since been, we cannot wonder at the praises bestowed upon a state of poverty in those times. And when the storm of persecution had been hushed, and the Church of Christ had begun to have its share of earthly goods, such declarations as these were brought forward against it, in order to condemn it, as it were, out of its own mouth. And ever since that time, there have always been persons ready on every occasion to reproach the Christian clergy, in particular, by

referring to the poverty of the apostles and first preachers of the Gospel, as to a rule for all their successors. Such persons abound in the present day, and are often men professing a great deal of regard for religion, and themselves enjoying a full share of this world's goods. They need to be reminded that, if their argument is worth anything, it will go further than they apply it : the Church of Christ is not, as some mistaken people seem to fancy, confined to the clergy alone ; it is composed of clergy and laymen, and if riches, or even a moderate sufficiency, are such a sad hinderance to the former in their Christian course, they cannot be otherwise to the latter, who have the same steep and narrow path to tread. Let the wealthy layman, then, either be silent respecting the wealth of the clergy, or else let him show his sense of the encumbrance of riches to the Christian by relieving his own shoulders of a portion at least of so grievous a burden. Such men forget that it is the duty of every *disciple*, and especially of every *minister*, of Christ, to learn " how to be full, and how to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need," in a way becoming his calling. They forget, too, that as trials, and want, and sufferings of every kind were foretold of the Church, so likewise was it foretold that " kings should be her nursing fathers, and their queens her nursing mothers." (Isaiah xlix. 23.) The Emperor Julian was the father of this class of objectors. He seized on some of the property of certain churches at Edessa,

distributing their money to his soldiers, and keeping their lands himself. "I show myself," was his sneering remark, "the real friend of the Galileans. Their *admirable* law has promised the kingdom of heaven to the poor, and they will advance with more diligence in the paths of virtue and salvation, when they are relieved by my assistance from the load of worldly possessions*." And the same emperor in the same spirit of cruel mockery answered the Christians, who complained of the plunder committed on them, because they would not offer sacrifice: "Your Christ has given you a law that when you suffer unjustly, you should bear it resolutely; and when oppressed and injured, should not answer again."

It would be an endless task to repeat all the improvements in morals and virtue which followed the religion of Christ into the world. And it would be as tedious, and a much more unpleasant task, to point out all the wicked and monstrous practices that disappeared before it. There is, however, one thing, which is so contrary to all natural feeling, that it de-

* Julian's mode of helping believers on in their way to heaven still has its admirers. For example, in order to increase the spiritual usefulness of our own Church,—now that the number of souls in England and Wales is doubled and trebled since its income was first settled,—they propose to rob her of her already too slender means. They love religion, they say, and are the Church's best friends; and therefore they wish to starve its clergy, because, forsooth, the apostles were poor;—to shut up half its places of Divine worship, because their humble attendants cannot of themselves support a minister.

serves to be noticed, otherwise we could hardly form a correct notion of the state from which Christianity has delivered mankind. We are taught to acknowledge children to be (as they are) a gift from Heaven, by doing all we can to bring them up in a good and religious manner. But the ancient heathens thought no more of their children than of the brutes that perish ;—a father, in those times of darkness, would order his helpless babe to be destroyed with very little more concern than he would have ordered the destruction of one of his domestic animals. If it did not suit his pocket or his fancy to be at the expense of rearing the child, in case of its being at all weak or deformed, or if it was a female and not the eldest of that sex, the *Roman law* allowed him either to destroy it at once, or else to thrust the poor babe out of his dwelling, and leave it exposed somewhere to the chance mercy of strangers, or to the horrors of a slow untimely death. An early Christian reproaches them with this disgraceful custom, as being men who “strangle the children born of themselves, or if *too tender* to do this, expose them !” And elsewhere he says they deny that light, which was no gift of theirs, to the simple souls of their own infants ; and if they spare not their own flesh and blood, how can they be sparing of anothers ? “But,” continues he, “what shall we say of those who are led by a false tenderness only to expose their children ? They cannot be thought innocent, who cast their own bowels as a

prey to dogs, and, as far as in them lies, kill their offspring in a yet more cruel way than if they had strangled them." But it was not long before the Christian religion put an end to such barbarous practices, which were forbidden by law, as soon as it was professed by the emperor. And now, so great is the change produced by that religion in the minds of men, we can hardly think without horror of such acts of cold-blooded cruelty of which the *civilized* heathen Romans thought nothing at all. When we read, as we may in one of their plays, of a good sort of old man, all kindness and benevolence*, scolding his poor wife, when he finds that she has contrived, secretly and contrary to his orders, to bring up her daughter, we can hardly be brought to believe that this ever was a faithful picture of real life. And when we see from undoubted proofs that it was so, we may perceive at once the difference in domestic life between heathens and Christians, and be thankful. It has been most truly observed that the picture of heathen vices and manners given by St. Paul (1 Rom. chap. i.) is not at all overdrawn, but taken from the very life.

* This same old man, when asked by a neighbour, in whose affairs he was taking some concern, whether he had not enough to do to manage his own, replies, in a former part of the play, in those well-known words:—"I am a man, and take an interest in all that belongs to men," which gained so much applause in the Roman theatre. How fearfully must custom have hardened the hearts of those who could feel the beauty of this sentiment of universal benevolence, and yet calmly behold and practise such inhuman crimes.

“Let the reader peruse that chapter with attention, and let him thank God, from the bottom of his soul, that he is a Christian.”

Beside this fearful list of heathen crimes from the hand of an apostle, let him place the following sketch of the Christian character by one of the fathers of the Church, not for the sake of mere curiosity, but with a view of filling up the outline in his own life. “We are all and every one of us,” says St. Augustin, “the temple of God, because he condescends to dwell in the union of all (the Church), and in each of us separately ;—in both cases, neither greater nor less, but the same God. When bidden to lift up our hearts towards Him*, our hearts are his altars ; we appease him by means of our High Priest, His only Son ; to Him do we offer sacrifices of blood, when for his truth we are striving even unto death ; to Him we present, as it were, a sweet-smelling savour, when in His sight we are burning with a holy love ; to Him do we make our vows, returning back again to Him his own gifts and ourselves also ; to Him, lest ungrateful forgetfulness should in course of time steal upon us, do we devote and make holy the memory of His benefits by means of solemn festivals and appointed days ; to Him, lastly, do we consume on the altar of our heart,

* This formed in the early Church, as it does in our own, part of the solemn service before the receiving of the Holy Communion of the Body and Blood of Christ.

by the fire of fervent charity, the sacrifice of humility and praise. In order to see Him, as he may be seen, and to hold fast by Him, we are cleansed from every spot of sins or evil desires, and by His name are we made holy."

CHAPTER VIII.

. FAULTS OF THE EARLY CHRISTIANS.

SUCH is the universal weakness of human nature, that it is impossible to form a correct notion either of any individual, or of any class of men, without paying some attention to their faults. These unhappily form a chapter in the history of every person and of every society, and to this general rule the history of the early Christians, admirable as their conduct was in many respects, furnishes no exception. They, like all other men, fell sometimes into mistakes and errors, and if the consideration of these be less pleasing than that of their good qualities and virtues, it is by no means unworthy of our notice ; it may afford us many a warning lesson, besides that it may prevent us, when we see that they were erring mortals like ourselves, from feeling despair of being able to follow in other respects their bright example. One great cause of the mistakes into which they were led was, that they were somewhat given to *overdo what was right*. From the spiritual Sodom of heathenism many of them, warned by the voice of the Gospel, had "escaped for their lives ;" and, full of horror at the thoughts of the state from which they had been delivered, they continued to flee from it without ever recalling to mind that it was possible to go too far,

to be wrong in the opposite extreme. They looked back with disgust upon the vices and loose morals of those whom they had left, and in consequence the early Christians were too apt to overstrain things the other way. Misled by this feeling they began very early to discourage second marriages, and some of them were even inclined to set their faces altogether against a married life*. One writer (A. D. 177,) ventures to say that "whosoever forsakes his wife, even though she be dead, is but a plausible adulterer." There were in the Church, from the very first, persons of both sexes, who from motives of religion were willing to live single, and devoted themselves to God. In those times of trial much might be said in favour of such a course, as it left the parties that chose it free from all domestic cares and encumbrances, on which account alone, no doubt, it is recommended by St. Paul. (1 Cor. vii.) But at length this kind of life was too much esteemed, even by pious and well-meaning men; there was an appearance of holiness about it, which dazzled the minds of the vulgar, and furnished the better-informed with what seemed to be a strong argument for Christianity against

* Several of the sects of heretics either were, or affected to be, very strict in this respect; and perhaps a wish not to be outdone in purity by these, might have some influence in making such doctrines fashionable. Instead of following the truth, and turning aside neither to the right hand nor to the left, men are often tempted into error by its vain, but shallow, pretences of superior holiness.

heathenism ; and finally it came to be so cried up and respected, as to become a cause of the greatest abuses. It would have been well, if the Church of Christ had always kept in mind the words of one, who was himself quite partial enough to a single life. He says, in arguing against certain heretics who considered marriage to have been instituted by Satan, that "the *real* Christian is not manifested by choosing a single life ; but that he surpasses others who can attend to all the duties of the married and parental state without being separated from the love of God ; who can rise superior to every trial occasioned by wife and children, by servants and possessions." And he adds, "the man that has no home is in many respects without a trial." If these remarks, sensible and agreeable as they are to Scripture and to reason, had been borne in mind by the early Church, later ages might perhaps have escaped those swarms of monks and nuns which have abounded to such a degree in the Romish Church, and have produced so much mischief, though not quite unmixed with good, in the Christian world.

A kindred error to this, and one also which sprang from the very same desire of avoiding as far as possible the faults of the heathens, was the undue regard sometimes paid to fasting, and such like acts of mortification and self-denial. *A certain degree of pride*, and a wish to go somewhat beyond their bare duty, might, in each of these cases, have had its effect

even in those times, upon the minds of some Christians. Especially after persecution had ceased, men were to be found, who, full of admiration for the martyrs, "contrived a method of voluntary martyrdom, and inflicted upon themselves as many pains and penalties as pagan cruelty had invented. They left parents, wives, friends, children, families, and fortunes; they retired from the world, they obliged themselves to a single and solitary life; and allowed themselves no more food, raiment, and sleep, than would just keep body and soul together. Several of them, when their mothers or sisters came to visit them, and earnestly begged admittance, would not be seen. When any of them quitted their retirement and returned to the world, they were considered as apostates, and men lost to goodness." It is said that they sometimes carried their self-torments to such a pitch, as to drive themselves at last to distraction and self-murder. Many, too, who had been forced from home by persecution, becoming attached to the wild places where they had found shelter from the rage of their enemies, chose to live there for ever afterwards. Such a one was Paul of Thebais, an Egyptian, who, when quite young, withdrew to a cavern in the deserts, wherein he continued to dwell till his death, which, it is said, did not happen till nearly ninety years afterwards. He was called the first hermit, and was an object of much admiration. It would have been well, if he had done as little

mischief by his example after death, as he had done *good* by his manner of passing his days during life. But it soon became very much the fashion to copy him, and it suited the Egyptians in particular, who have always been noted for their folly and extravagance in religious matters. And, as is usually the case, it was not long before the master was outdone by some of the scholars. Antony, who lived in the same country, dwelt also in the desert, and is supposed to be the first who collected the monks or hermits into a kind of society. But the worst proof of the folly of these eastern Christians in this respect, (for those in the west were much more moderate,) occurred upwards of one hundred years after his time. About A. D. 423, a Syrian shepherd, named Simeon, had a pillar raised, on the top of which he remained night and day. During a space of more than thirty years his only change was his drawing nearer to heaven, by having the height of his pillar raised from nine to sixty feet, at four different times. His chief employment was prayer. Habit taught him to move about easily and safely upon the narrow spot to which he had confined himself; a very little was enough to support life; indeed, it is said that he more than once passed a whole Lent without eating any thing, and a single garment of skin, covering his whole body, was his sole protection against the weather. The respect paid to him was astonishing, even kings sent to consult him on account

of his supposed holiness, and acquaintance with the will of Heaven. After his death*, his pillar was reckoned sacred; and his example was followed at an humble distance by certain persons, who, under the names of *Pillar-men*, *Holy Birds*, and *Martyrs of the Air*, perched themselves in various parts of the East. An attempt of this kind was made by a follower of Simeon in the West, but, much to the credit of their good sense, the neighbouring bishops ordered the pillar of the mistaken man to be pulled down, and so put a stop to his scheme.

Such strange notions and practices would hardly deserve to be remarked, but that they throw great light upon the pride of man's heart, and upon the power it soon began to gain, even among Christians; and besides this, they are the more curious because they are so very different from what we now see; for the spirit of our own times leans rather too much towards self-enjoyment than self-mortification. And as we have seen many examples of martyrs for *righteousness* sake, it is as well to have one or two examples of those, who may, without want of charity, be called

* His death was hastened by a wound in his thigh. It was said by some that the devil, under the form of an angel, invited Simeon to mount, as Elijah did, a chariot of fire. The saint, too full of self-satisfaction, was caught by the snare, and hastily raising his foot, Satan punished him by wounding him. Whatever this tale is worth, it shows at least that the duty of Christian humility was not entirely forgotten in those times.

martyrs for *self-righteousness* sake. One thing must not be forgotten. Simeon's exploits were performed in a comparatively late age, and in a land that was always the nurse of religious extravagance and folly. Still it was the over-much strictness and harshness of Christians in better and purer times, that led the way for such absurdities. It must, however, be confessed that many of the early Christian authors have left us most excellent rules with regard to fasting and self-denial; and it would be well if these were more generally observed even now. "First of all," says a very early writer, "keep from every bad or disgraceful word, and purify your senses from all the vanity of this world. If you do this, it will be a proper fast. So therefore do. And when this is done, taste nothing at all but bread and water on the day when you fast, and when you have reckoned up the worth of what you would otherwise have eaten, put that sum by, and give it to the widow, the orphan, or the poor, and so shall you complete the humbling of your soul, in order that he who receives of your bounty may satisfy himself, and that his prayers for you may go up to the Lord God." Origen says he had found in some book this saying recorded of the apostles, "Blessed is he who fasts to feed the poor; this man's fast is acceptable unto God." Indeed the first Christians made no such nice distinction of meats, as has since prevailed. A stranger, it is related, once happened to call upon a bishop during Lent,

and this last having nothing in his house but a bit of pork, ordered it to be dressed and set before his guest; the stranger, however, would not touch it, saying that he was a Christian. The bishop told him that this was a good reason for his not refusing it, since the word of God had declared all things clean to them that are clean.

Another point in which the early Christians were apt to carry things too far was with regard to martyrdom. It was perhaps a very nice matter to hit exactly the happy mean in this respect, and equally to avoid the two extremes of rashness and cowardice. Every believer was bound to be always ready and willing to die for his faith,—but whoever felt more than this, whoever felt, as some did, a burning desire to die in the cause of Christ, was so far encouraging a wrong and unnatural feeling. “I am a Christian, I long to die,” was an exclamation sometimes to be heard in the courts of the heathen judges; and so strange a desire was but little likely to bring any credit upon the religion that was supposed to have prompted it. Indeed, it sounds more like the wild ravings of a madman, than the calm resolution of one who has counted the cost of his undertaking. And it sometimes happened that those rash, headstrong men, who were the first to provoke against themselves the terrors of a cruel death, were also the first to shrink from those very terrors. One named Quintus, for instance, at the time when Polycarp

suffered, rashly offered himself to the judge, as being a Christian. But no sooner did Quintus behold the wild beasts that were to be set upon him, than he was struck with fear, and began to change his mind, so that he was at last persuaded to offer sacrifice. Such conduct, however, it is but fair to say, was never generally approved by the early Christians. The remarks on the case of Quintus by those who have recorded it are very sensible. "We ought not," say they, "to praise such brethren as offer themselves of their own accord, but such as, when discovered in their concealment, cling fast even in the midst of sufferings to the truth. For so does the Gospel declare, and witnesses by this example, wherein we see the man who offered himself to death giving way, whilst he who was forced before the judge was conqueror." And so too it was ordained by a bishop of Carthage, that those who rashly thrust themselves upon death should not be honoured with the name of martyrs*. Indeed they were quite unworthy of so noble a name, and were, in fact, little better than self-destroyers. If the story be true of the Christians in

* This bishop of Carthage does not seem to have been himself blessed with quite courage enough for the times in which he lived. A curious case of conscience occurred with him about A. D. 304. He was accused of having given up, in one of the persecutions, the books belonging to his church; but he was acquitted upon proving that he had deceived the officers, and delivered to them certain heretical works instead of the Scriptures. His name was Mensurius.

a certain place in Asia coming in a body and offering themselves to be put to death, the answer of the heathen governor seems very natural :—" Miserable men ! if you wish to die, are there no precipices or halters ?" The heathens, it must be remembered, thought very lightly of self-murder, and certainly it does not seem to matter greatly whether a man committed this by casting himself from a rock or tying a rope round his neck, or by coming unsought for and placing himself in the hands of those whom he knew to be thirsting after his blood*. This subject is well treated by Justin, whose surname of Martyr bespeaks his own willingness to give up life and its enjoyments when the cause of the Gospel required this. In answer to the question, " If you Christians are so eager to go to God, why do you not kill yourselves, and give us no further trouble ?" he replies :—" The reason why we do not destroy ourselves, and yet, when we are questioned, boldly confess that we are Christians, is this :—we are taught that God did not make the world without an object, but for the sake of the human race ; and that He delights in them who imitate His attributes, and is displeased with them who embrace what is evil either in word or deed. If,

* It must be observed, however, that these Christians, offering themselves in a large body to the governor, have been supposed to have been left rather by a desire of showing him how impossible it would be to destroy them *all*, than with any other view. Indeed such was the effect of their doing so, that it put an end to the persecution.

therefore, we should destroy ourselves, we should, as far as depends on us, be the cause that no one would be born or instructed in the Divine doctrine, or even the cause that the whole human race should fail; and thus we should act in opposition to the will of God*. But when we are questioned, we do not deny that we are Christians, because we are not conscious to ourselves of any evil, and because we think it impious not to speak the truth under all circumstances." And another early writer draws strikingly the line of distinction between one who puts himself in the way of suffering, and one who declares his gladness to suffer when brought before the magistrate. If the heathens should ask, "Why do you complain of being persecuted, when it is your own wish to suffer?" the answer is:—"No doubt, we wish to suffer; but in the same manner that a soldier wishes for the battle. He wishes to obtain the spoil and glory consequent upon victory; but would gladly avoid the danger to which he will be exposed, though he does not shrink from it. So we, though we endure your persecutions in the hope of finally obtaining the reward of our fidelity, would gladly avoid them, could we do so consistently with our duty to Christ."

* We must bear in mind that Justin is here arguing with heathens, and therefore we must not look for these reasons against self-destruction, which, however full of weight, would weigh only with one who believes firmly in a day of judgment, and a future state of happiness or misery.

It might be no very difficult task to point out certain reasons besides an overflowing zeal in the service of God, that led some men so rashly to venture their lives in the confession of their faith. We have already seen to what a degree of respect and honour the martyrs and confessors were raised in the first ages, and we know from the present practice of the Church of Rome the height of absurdity, and even of blasphemy, to which these feelings were at length carried. Now the commencement of these mischievous opinions is, it must be confessed, to be traced up to the early times of Christianity. But before we enter upon the undue regard which began, through what was at first a very natural error, to be paid to the martyrs and confessors in these times, it may be well to observe, that it was by no means every person professing his faith as a Christian, that was put to death during the cruel persecutions of the Church of which he was a member. It was common with the heathen magistrates to select those persons who, by their talents, influence, office, or station, were most conspicuous among the believers ; and while these suffered the severest trials, the rest were in general allowed to escape with little or no serious injury. Bearing in mind, then, the chance there was of escaping, even after an open declaration of their faith had been made, we may turn to the consideration of the vast respect paid, and the undue authority granted, to such as had weathered the storm of persecution ; and we

shall soon see a great deal to tempt the unknown, but aspiring, Christian into that bold, reckless disregard of life, which was sometimes manifested by such characters. When a man had openly, and in the face of sufferings, confessed his belief in Christ, he was afterwards looked upon as full of the Holy Spirit, so that whatever he said was considered to come from God himself. While yet in prison he was consulted on every occasion, and afterwards was maintained at the public expense, being always treated with the greatest reverence, and very often, however unfit in other respects, raised to the ministry, or made a bishop, when an opportunity offered. And even if the cruel laws of the heathens had their course, still such wild notions of the blessedness of all who died as martyrs were commonly held, as to tempt many minds to undergo the trial for the sake of the glory that would succeed. Yearly festivals were appointed in memory of their death ; nay, it was vainly supposed by some that their sins were washed away by their own, instead of by their Saviour's blood ; and that they were admitted to a share in the counsels of God, with whom they had great influence through their prayers*. One example, taken from the African

* It may be remarked that we must not measure the language of the early writers, who often spoke loosely and unguardedly, in too strict a manner. For instance, in the case above, that of a martyr's sins being washed away by his own blood, it is the opinion of no ordinary authority, the present Bishop of Lincoln, that this was thought to have such a power only *through Christ's*

Church, of the mischief caused by such an extraordinary regard being paid to the opinions of the confessors who had escaped death, will at the same time make us acquainted with other instances of weakness on the part of the Christians about the middle of the third century. The believers had for some time enjoyed peace and repose, when a sudden change for the worse took place, and their total destruction was set on foot by the emperor Decius. Many held fast to their faith, but not a few among them were tempted to fall, either by offering incense to the gods, or else, if they were rich, bribing the magistrates to put their names in the lists of those who had done so*. Such men, who really believed in their hearts, were rather to be pitied than severely punished for their weakness. But as it would not have been right to allow them, when the danger was past, to take their places again, unnoticed by any censure, in the Christian churches, it had always been customary to make these persons undergo the loss of certain privi-

merits, and for His sake. So that, according to this, however they might *mistake*, they did not *set aside* the doctrine of Christ's atonement.

* This last practice only fed the flames of persecution. The heathen governor had nothing to do, when he wished to draw upon the purses of the richer sort of Christians, but to seize, and torture, or to put to death a few of their poorer brethren. The over-strict Tertullian, who did not approve even of flying from persecution, is very bitter against this mode of buying safety. "As in flight," says he, "safety is purchased for nothing, so in buying your safety, you fly by means of money. With your feet you stand still,—it is your money that carries you away from danger."

leges of the faithful, so that it was sometimes many years before they were restored to their former rights of full communion. At this time, however, these lapsed or fallen Christians were so many in number as to make it no very easy matter to enforce so strict a discipline. And besides, it had been usual for the confessors to give, if they thought fit, to any of these weak brethren a certificate of peace, as it was called, which restored him to his full privileges as a Christian, without undergoing much trouble or punishment*. But this custom was sadly abused, the power of the bishops was almost set aside by that of these confessors; and all, in consequence, was confusion and disorder. Few were bold enough to speak against the "certificates of peace," which, coming as they did from the hands of martyrs and confessors, were looked upon as if they proceeded from God; and thus the cowardice of weak and double-minded Christians found a shelter from punishment of any kind under the abused authority of Heaven itself.

But as no small mischief befell the Church of Christ from the headstrong zeal and overdrawn notions of purity that prevailed, so still more mischief came upon it after it had begun to spread itself very widely throughout all ranks of people, from mistaken practices of quite a different kind. Full of an anxious desire to enlarge the boundaries of Christianity and

* According to Cyprian, martyrs are to *knock*, not to *break down* the doors of re-admission into the Church.

to narrow those of heathenism, some persons seem to have forgotten that we must never be tempted into evil by any prospect, however flattering, of future good. Such acts as forgeries of certain books in order to turn the heathens from their opinions were practised by some Christians. These men were few in number, and mostly heretics in doctrine; and even they, we must hope, were not aware of the mischief and evil of such falsehood. But still it certainly lowers our opinion of the early ages to find, that in the second century it was an established maxim with some Christians, that it was pardonable in an advocate for religion to avail himself of fraud and deception, if they were likely to conduce towards the attainment of any considerable good. Under the unhappy influence of those feelings which lead a man to follow, not what he knows to be right, but what he thinks will prove expedient, many customs and abuses, which had before been confined to the heathen worship, were allowed silently to creep into the Christian Church. Within two hundred years of the birth of Christ the philosophy of the heathens began to be looked upon with too friendly an eye by some of the best and most enlightened believers, who vainly looked to this as to a bond of union, whereby they hoped to draw the unbelievers to the knowledge of the truth. After about two hundred years more the purity of religion sadly and speedily declined. The pagans were indeed universally converted, but it was

to a form of religion in many respects too nearly resembling that which they had forsaken. And in course of time the resemblance became still greater. Instead of the images of false gods in the temples, there were images and relics of martyrs in the churches; instead of the fables of heathen Rome, succeeded the fables of popish Rome; instead of having no offices for Divine worship, the offices of Divine worship were performed in a tongue not commonly understood; instead of sacrificing for liberty to sin without punishment, an indulgence purchasable at a certain price was granted by the Pope to the same effect; and so, in but too many particulars, was the Christian Church brought to agree with the practice of the heathens. Still, through the dark ages that followed, the light of Christian truth was never quite put out; and even amidst the corruptions of Rome in her worst days of error, there was much left that was good. This at the time of the Reformation was disengaged from the filth and rubbish that surrounded it, and shone forth again in all its former grace and glory.

It is not necessary to go much further into the faults of a body of men possessed of so many virtues as were the early Christians, so we need only notice one or two more points. In the first beginnings of our holy religion its professors were known generally, as their Master wished them to be, by their love to one another. And so have its real followers always

been known,—so indeed are they still to be distinguished. But in a short time such strange fancies, such evil practices, such tremendous errors, such God-denying heresies, were sent forth by some persons under the name of Christianity, that disputes, of course, arose. Charity, not thinking any evil, was forced at the call of duty to cast away the covering that concealed from its eyes the faults of the offenders; and afterwards zeal sometimes carried those that were right too far, so that miserable quarrels ensued, and have ever since continued, among men who, from their common name of Christians, should have been friends and brethren. The reproach that “no wild beasts were so outrageous to mankind, as some called Christians were to one another,” was a severe one, and had some truth in it, though we must allow for the heathen malice of him that made it. But, however, from the time when the converted Jews would fain have made all believers obedient to Moses as well as Christ, and were withstood so warmly, yet charitably, by St. Paul, to the present day, when the difference of opinions among Christians is as great as ever, or even greater, the same Power has been watchful over the truth, the same God has been protecting through every trial, either of prosperity or adversity, his true Church. And those who without breaking asunder the bond of peace have held fast the unity of Spirit, will not be forgotten by Him in the day of trouble, nor overlooked in the day of reward.

It was a very early, and, as it would seem, a very harmless custom to make the sign of the cross, as a token of faith in Christ crucified, on almost every possible occasion. In all the services of the church this was in the first ages a common ceremony, and so long as the heathens remained in great numbers, (among whom the very thought of serving a Master who had lost his life upon the cross seemed absurd,) nothing could serve better to express the zeal of the believer than his signing himself upon the forehead, the place wherein the blush of shame does most readily make its appearance, with that despised and hated mark, as a proof that he felt no shame, but rather gloried, in the token of his Redeemer's sufferings. So long as the making of this sign was attended with feelings of faith and devotion no objection could be raised against it. What indeed could be more desirable than a slight action of this sort, at all times easily performed, and always lifting up the heart of him who used it towards the bitter agonies of his Saviour, the tender mercies of his God? But this good and pious use of the sign of the cross, which prevailed among the early Christians, was in latter ages corrupted into a mere superstitious observance and unmeaning form. Among the ignorant papists, to make the sign of the cross on the forehead, and repeat a prayer or two in a language not at all understood, and sometimes addressed to a being not at all to be worshipped or prayed to, grew in time to be put in the

place of a reasonable worship performed in spirit and in truth. And in consequence of such abuse, the ceremony of signing the cross is almost wholly laid aside by Protestants. In one case our own Church makes an exception, and still uses this ceremony, as it was used by the early Christians, in the service of baptism*. It is doing injustice to the first ages of our faith to reckon among their faults a harmless, or even pious, practice, like this, which was abused in after-times, and for the approaching abuses of which they seem to have been sorry, when they were aware of them†. Another custom, better perhaps deserving a place among the faults of the early Church, and yet by no means supposing all the mistakes and follies that the Church of Rome has since attached to the practice, was their constant habit of praying for the dead. Not that the first ages had any the slightest notion of such a place as Purgatory, much less of its fires being necessary, in addition to the precious blood of Christ, to purify the souls of the faithful from sin. The truth is, that they seem to have supposed that the prayers of the faithful upon earth could in some degree profit those that were departed, whether they had led good or evil lives. It was

* See page 119.

† For example, some monks in the fifth century, wishing to take up their cross, and follow Christ, made themselves wooden crosses, which they always carried about their necks, a practice, says a writer of those times, more likely to make all who saw them smile, than to edify the spectators.

thought that the happiness of the one class might be somewhat increased, and the misery of the other somewhat lessened, by these kind attentions of their surviving friends; and thus, although it was not quite agreed in what manner, or in what measure, such a practice benefited the dead, almost all agreed in encouraging it. And in consequence of this, prayers for the deceased formed a regular part of all the early forms of worship, or liturgies. With regard to our own Church of England, while we may rest satisfied that it has laid aside a custom, which, however supported by the example of the Fathers, has no warrant in Scripture, we must take care not to confound the belief of the early Church upon this point with that of the Roman Catholics, from which it is altogether different*.

It is needless to pursue the subject of this chapter any further. In other respects the Christians of those early times acted in much the same way as we see Christians now acting. There were then, as well as now, tares springing up among the wheat; there was a mixture of bad men along with the many good men who then lived and died within the pale of the Christian Church: there were some unfaithful and careless among the clergy, and some of the same

* For a full account of the ancient prayers for the dead, and the difference between them and the Romish prayers, see Archbishop Usher's Tract, republished in "The Tracts for the Times"—No. 72.

description among their hearers also. There were noisy busy-bodies, who made the most of the power of electing the clergy, then in the hands of the people ; and there were ambitious kings or prelates, who took advantage of the evils always attending such a mode of election as an excuse for getting fresh power into their own hands. In those times, when the age of miracles had scarcely ceased, there was too ready a belief granted to wonders of every kind, many of which, one would have thought, needed only to be compared with those recorded in Scripture to ensure their being rejected. And with regard to the writings of the Fathers of the Christian Church, while there is much to admire and approve in them, they are not without their faults. They were, it is true, too near the time of Christ and his apostles, whose steps they followed too faithfully, to err greatly in matters of importance. But in smaller matters, in occasional feebleness of reasoning, or trifling modes of thinking, they have their weak points. Indeed what book, save only the Holy Scriptures, is free from such ? And it may have been so ordained, in the case of the earliest Christian authors, that the difference between them and the writers inspired by God might be made the more manifest. And here we may thankfully remark that, as in natural, so in spiritual blessings, those which are most valuable are most freely given to all. As all men are by Divine bounty supplied with the necessaries of life, such as food and air, so

are all Christians supplied by the same hand with the means of salvation, the Holy Scriptures. Whereas, the comforts and luxuries of life are bestowed but on a few in comparison; and so it is with that degree of learning which enables us to read the works of the Christian Fathers, works good, indeed, and useful, but by no means necessary to be known. Nevertheless we must not lose sight of the obligations we owe them, if not as *guides*, still as *witnesses* to the truth. Nor because, unhappily, Christianity has never yet, even in the earliest times, reached that height of perfection which a strict and universal obedience to its rules would certainly secure, may we suppose that its blessings to society have been small, or the change it has wrought but a trifling one. This is far from being the case. Unless we had before our eyes the example of the heathen mode of life, we can hardly value as we ought the blessings, or form a due notion of the change, which we owe to the power of the Gospel. "The churches of God which have been instructed in Christ," says an old writer, "are as light in the world, when compared with those assemblies of the people that are held in the same cities. Who is there that will not confess that the very worst of the Churches, and such as are in comparison inferior to others, are nevertheless far superior to the assemblies of the people? For example; at Athens, the Church of God is meek and quiet, as it seeks only to please Him who is over all; but the public assem-

bly at Athens is riotous and factious, and by no means to be compared with the Church for good conduct. The very same thing may be said of the Christian and heathen assemblies at Corinth, and also at Alexandria. And if any candid lover of truth hears and considers these things, he will admire Him, who has designed, and been able to establish, in every city, churches to dwell within the same walls as these assemblies of the people*." Still, though it be a common-place saying, it deserves to be repeated, that we must not look for perfection here below. Instead of expecting it in others we had better strive after it ourselves. St. Augustin's remark in one of his works is always to be borne in mind in reading the history of the believers in Christ's name. "Wheresoever," he says, "in these books I have made mention of the Church not having spot or wrinkle, it is not so to be taken, as if she were so now, but that she is prepared to be so, when she shall appear glorious. For now, by reason of certain ignorances and infirmities of her members, the whole Church hath cause to say every day, 'Forgive us our trespasses.'"

* It is a question whether the practice and arguments so fashionable in our own times would have convinced this Christian writer, that men are not at all better qualified to rule and make laws for a nation, because their minds are enlightened by the truths of Christianity.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FATE OF SOME OF THE CHIEF PERSECUTORS OF THE CHRISTIANS.

IT is an undoubted truth, of which we may see, both in the history of the past, and in the actual events of the present time, abundance of examples, that wickedness and crime seldom go unpunished even in this world. But while we always keep in mind this general truth, we must take care how we apply it to the case of any particular person. Being without the means of rightly distinguishing, we must not suffer ourselves to be too forward in saying what misfortunes are, and what are not, the judgments of an offended God. But while we avoid, as every Christian should avoid, all uncharitable judgment, particularly upon living individuals, we must confess that it is impossible to read the early history of our faith without at once perceiving the clearest and plainest proofs of Divine justice in visiting those that persecuted the truth with the vengeance due to their sins. And we may feel the more sure, that in this case we are right in pronouncing the evils that came upon these persons to have been sent from God, when we compare the history of the first persecutors, of whom we read in the New Testament, with that of their successors, men resembling them alike both in crimes

and in punishment. At the very opening of the Gospel we meet with the cruel and cunning tyrant Herod, falsely called, *the Great*. We cannot wonder at what we read in Scripture of this man's conduct to the innocent babes of Bethlehem, when we learn from other authors, that his wife, his mother, brother, grandfather, and uncle, as well as *three of his own children*, were put to death by him. He was an usurper of the throne, and having married a daughter of the family which he had displaced, he was for ever tormented with jealous fears of losing his kingdom. It is said that the Roman emperor Augustus observed, that it was better to be Herod's *hog* than his *son*, alluding to the well-known Jewish law, which pronounces the hog to be unclean. As far as this world was concerned, Herod was a most successful man; but his own crimes and his unnatural conduct to his family poisoned all his happiness. He was for a time afflicted with madness, arising from the force of his returning affection for his beloved and beautiful wife, whom he had so cruelly put to death; and he never entirely recovered from this awful shock occasioned by his own evil jealousy. At length his end drew near, and a miserable end it was. Within three years of his murder of the innocents at Bethlehem, and his intended destruction of Christ Himself, Herod was smitten by the hand of God, and delivered over to the bitter pains of a lingering death. Burnt up with an inward fever, ever craving, but never satis-

fied with meat, having his inside full of sores and his legs swollen ; with worms and other vermin crawling about him, and beginning already to devour his yet living body ; the evil-hearted tyrant sunk slowly beneath the weight of these plagues, and at length expired in convulsions. So plain was the finger of God in all this, and Herod's crimes were of so hateful a character, that even the Jews thought these evils Divine judgments. The miserable man died within a few days of the decease of one of his sons, the *third* whom he had himself cut off in the flower of youth ! By way of causing a general mourning among his subjects, Herod is said to have ordered the chief men in his kingdom, whom he had caused to assemble at Jericho, where he died, to be put to the sword as soon as he expired. This horrid design was not fulfilled, but still it may help us to form some notion of the torments felt by the first persecutor of Christ. We may venture to say that Herod suffered far less in his dying hours from all the loathsome diseases and cruel agonies which fell upon his body, than he suffered from the yet more loathsome guilt, and the still fiercer torments of passion, which were busy to the very last in their work of destruction upon his soul. His son, Herod Antipas, who beheaded John the Baptist, and with his men of war set at nought and mocked Christ, died in banishment, having been deprived of his power by the Roman emperor Caligula. Although the first Herod had destroyed so

many of his children, he left a numerous and flourishing family behind him. Three of his surviving sons were made *tetrarchs*, or rulers of a fourth part of their father's kingdom; and the remaining portion was given to their aunt, the sister of Herod the Great. But in spite of all its seeming prosperity this family had no root of steadfastness in it. In a hundred years it had passed away from the face of the earth, and not a single member of it was left. So suddenly did the wicked race of Herod consume, perish, and come to a fearful end!

Pontius Pilate, who, however unwillingly he might do it, was weak and dishonest enough to disgrace his office as a judge by condemning to death a person in whom he had found no fault, was afterwards recalled from his government on account of his cruelty and covetousness, and, being banished from Rome, at length perished by his own hands. If we would see the end of another Herod, we have only to turn to the twelfth chapter of Acts, which begins with the death of James the brother of John, and ends with the miserable close of the life of that man by whose orders he was slain. Ananias the high priest, who commanded the by-standers to smite St. Paul on the mouth, (Acts xxiii. 2.) was at last killed during the siege of Jerusalem, not by the hands of the Romans, but by an opposite faction of his own countrymen, headed, too, by his own son. We have elsewhere seen the cruelties practised upon the Christians by the

Emperor Nero*. Four years afterwards, (A. D. 68,) the Roman empire, wearied with his tyranny, shook off its hateful yoke. Nero in his distress knew not what to do. Almost all his friends and servants forsook him, and when he besought in vain one of his favourites to come and destroy him, "Have I then," he exclaimed, "neither friend nor enemy?" and rushed forth as if about to cast himself into the river Tiber. But fear checked his speed, and suddenly stopping, he sought for a place of concealment where he might recover himself. This one of his freedmen offered him, and having disguised himself he set out directly to the place, about four miles distant. The trembling tyrant, as he rode along, overheard his own soldiers abusing him, and wishing good fortune to his successor. One man, meeting him, said, "There go men after Nero!" Another asked him what news there was in the city about Nero. And a third person, a soldier, actually knew him, and addressed him by his name. However he got safe to the end of his journey, and then felt what hunger and thirst were, enjoying a draught of water, though he still refused to eat the coarse bread that was offered to him. After a long delay, when he heard that he was condemned to die, and that men were in pursuit of him, Nero resolved to kill himself. But death, which he had so often and so wantonly inflicted upon others, was full of terror to him. He felt the point of the weapons,

* See page 50.

and then put them up again, saying that the fatal hour had not come. After this he begged some of those about him to destroy themselves in order to encourage him by their example, and then he began to reproach himself for his cowardice. It was not till he heard the sound of the horses' feet approaching, with officers sent to seize him alive, that he could summon up courage enough to face death. And then, with the help of one of his attendants, he was despatched, just as the soldiers came into the room where he was lying. Such is the account given by a heathen historian of the wretched end of this monster, who disgraced the form of a man.

In considering the evils which befell the persecutors of our faith we cannot overlook the scattering abroad of that nation which put our Lord to death, and called down vengeance on their own heads by wishing His blood to be upon them and upon their children. The frantic wish was granted. His blood was, and still is, upon them and upon their children. Their city was destroyed, their country ravaged, and themselves either slain, or else driven, as outcasts and beggars, among all the nations of the earth. Never was the sure word of prophecy more completely fulfilled, never were the terrors of Divine anger more fearfully displayed than in the siege and ruin of Jerusalem. It is impossible here to enter into the well-known particulars of this event. Suffice it to say, that when the Roman army surrounded Jerusa-

lem, it was the feast of the Passover, so that the place was crowded with people; and in consequence of this the most horrible famine and disease prevailed among them*. Nor was this all. The wretched Jews were divided into parties among themselves, and these fought as fiercely within the walls against one another, as they did without them against their common enemies. Every trouble, that want and disease, war and hatred, murder and strife, could bring upon them, fell upon their heads with a weight that completely crushed them. And yet under all these evils, the whole nation, filled with a kind of madness, were daily expecting a Deliverer from Heaven, and ever ready to believe any person proclaiming himself to be the Messiah. However, their eyes were at length opened to the vanity of this hope. Jerusalem was taken, the temple was burnt down, though Titus, its conqueror, was desirous of preserving it; and the whole town, except a small portion left for a garrison of soldiers, and three towers, was laid so level, that the place seemed as if it had never been inhabited. Ninety-seven thousand were made captives, and abott

* It is almost needless to repeat the fearful story in Josephus, the Jewish historian, of the starving frantic mother, who killed and devoured her own child, or to point out how awfully the truth of Scripture was here made manifest. See Deut. xxviii. 56, 57. It is worth noticing that the poor people who in the early part of the siege went beyond the walls for provisions, were taken by the Romans, and crucified in such numbers, that there was not room for the crosses. Some of these very men might have joined in the cry raised against our Lord :—"Crucify him, crucify him!"

eleven hundred thousand perished in the siege ; and ever since this awful destruction of them, as a nation, have the Jews remained, still a distinct and separate people, scattered over the face of the whole earth ; an amazing proof of the certainty and power of the Divine judgments. The mighty Romans, their conquerors, who were but of yesterday compared with the children of Israel,—whose very name was unknown, when Solomon was reigning in all his glory,—have vanished long ago from the eyes of men. But the poor, despised, worn-out race of Israel, scanty in numbers and deprived of all power, has survived even to the present time. Such is the will of Heaven, and thus may we behold in every one belonging to that race a living memorial of the wonders of God's ways, and the terrors of His judgments. He has rejected them, and lest his rejection of them should be forgotten, He has preserved them from the common fate of nations, and kept them in their outcast state, to bear witness to the majesty of His word.

It is quite impossible to go through all the instances which have been brought of a speedy death or change of fortune overtaking such persons as were persecutors of the early Church. We must content ourselves with noticing only a few of these. Valerian, who became emperor A. D. 253, was at first extremely gentle and kind in his behaviour towards the Christians. But after a few years he suffered himself to be persuaded to alter his conduct, and so became, instead

of a mild and merciful prince, a cruel persecutor. He had many good qualities, but his end was such as was merited by his bitterness against the believers in the truth. When engaged in a war against the Persians, Valerian was taken prisoner by Sapor their king, through the contrivance, it is said, of the very man who had first prevailed on him to persecute the Christians; and who, as soon as his master was a prisoner, put in his own claim to the empire. However Valerian was never again permitted to see his native land, nor to behold the light of day in any other character than that of a miserable slave. The unhappy prisoner, now nearly eighty years of age, became an object of scorn and insult to his barbarous enemies such as no Roman emperor before him had ever been. Whenever Sapor wished to mount his horse or his chariot, the aged Roman (it is said) was forced to bend his back, that his conqueror might use it as a stepping-stone. And at the same time the unfeeling king would make sport of him, and tell him that there was more truth in his sad state than in all the pictures of conquered Persians that the Romans could make. In this deplorable state Valerian lived for several years, but, though his son had succeeded to his power at Rome, not a single effort to release him, or to wipe off the disgrace brought upon the honour of the empire, was ever made. At last, after his death, his skin was taken off and hung up in one of the Persian temples, in memory of this

triumph, and in order to be shown to the Romans, when they came upon public business, so as to teach them, from the remains of their captive prince, not to trust too much to their own strength. Valerian's son appears to have looked upon his father's fate in some measure as a punishment for his cruelty to the Christians, for as soon as he was made emperor he put a stop to the persecution, and never afterwards renewed it.

Diocletian, after he had been many years emperor, began (A. D. 303,) a war against the Christians, which was the last and fiercest of all the persecutions of the early Church. Into this conduct he was persuaded by Galerius his son-in-law, to whom he had given a share in the empire. He ordered all the churches to be pulled down, the books of the Christians to be burnt, and those who would not give them up, to be condemned to death. Besides this, every Christian in any public office was to be removed; persons of less note were put to torture, and no meetings were allowed to be held by those who believed in the Gospel of Christ. A fire which took place in the palace was charged upon the Christians, and at last the fury of the emperor rose to such a pitch, that Prisca, the wife of Diocletian, and Valeria his daughter, the wife of Galerius, were both forced to sacrifice, although they had embraced Christianity. Very soon after this Diocletian was seized with a dreadful sickness, under which he lingered in an

almost hopeless state for a long time, and from the effects of which he never entirely recovered. He had now reigned twenty-one years, and his son-in-law Galerius used every effort to persuade him to retire from the cares of government, which with some difficulty he prevailed upon him to do*. He continued in retirement some time, and whether when he died it was by poison or madness is uncertain. From the time of his disease, soon after he had commenced the persecution, he had always been subject to fits of madness. But the Christians still continued to suffer under the cruelty of Galerius, who was now sole master of the eastern part of the empire. At last his tyranny began also to draw near its close, and as his guilt had been much greater, so were his sufferings much more dreadful than those of his father-in-law. This first mover of the persecution was attacked by a kind of putrid sore, which continued to spread, in spite of all the arts of healing, or all that the knife could do to stop its progress. For a whole year did this mighty emperor linger on in such agony as can hardly be described, and in a state so loathsome that few could bear to approach him. At last, after having (as it is said) caused some of his physicians to be put to death, he began to draw near to his own end.

* It is to the credit of Diocletian's good sense, that a few years afterwards he could not be prevailed upon to return to power :—
“If you could see the quiet I enjoy at Salona,” said he, “and the cabbages I have planted with my own hands, you would be sensible that I am not to be tempted to so great a trouble.”

In vain had he applied to the heathen gods for help in his distress, and this might lead him to think the less of them ; for a heathen, with but very doubtful hopes of any future state, (if he had any hopes at all,) could only measure the power of his gods by their ability to grant him his desires in this life. Galerius then recollected the Christians, and his conduct towards them. He was just spared to make a proclamation, allowing the believers, who had now suffered for upwards of six years under his cruelty, to profess their religion and meet together for public worship, on condition of their praying to God for his health and for the prosperity of the state. A few days after this open declaration of his respect for the prayers of the Christians the poor man, who was almost a living corpse, was released from his misery,—a misery greater even than those which he had inflicted on so many harmless believers. The hand of God was upon him, as it was upon Herod, when he was “eaten of worms and gave up the ghost.” Let us hope, however, that Galerius repented somewhat of the undeserved pains which he had put upon others, whilst he was himself smarting under the just punishment sent upon him from an offended Deity.

Shortly after the death of Galerius, the remaining persecutors of the Church dropped off one by one, almost all of them dying by violent means, till at last, in the year 324, Constantine, the first Christian emperor, reigned alone. The religion of the Gospel

continued to be the religion of the empire after Constantine's decease, till an attempt was made by Julian, his great-nephew, who became emperor in 360, to restore the follies of heathenism. And if any one could have accomplished this scheme, Julian was the person, for he was a man of talent, and of great art. But all his efforts to discourage Christianity, and to promote heathenism, were to no purpose. Among other wild plans, he endeavoured, although no friend to the Jews, to rebuild Jerusalem and restore it to its former possessors, in order to contradict the words of prophecy. But in this undertaking he failed, as it is owned by a heathen writer, balls of fire bursting forth from the foundations, and hindering the workmen from proceeding in their labours. At last, after Julian had done the Christians all the mischief that was in his power, short of actual persecution, which he felt to be useless, and wisely avoided; and had also paid them the highest compliment, by adopting many of the Christian arrangements in his plans for reforming heathenism; he perished. In the full vigour of his hopes, and in the midst of all his schemes for destroying the religion of the Gospel, he fell in a battle against the Persians, having reigned only three, and lived only thirty-two years. It is said that when Julian was setting out upon this expedition from which he was never to return, and had spoken largely of what he intended afterwards to do to the Christians, one of these was asked in scorn by a heathen philosopher

"what the carpenter's son was now doing?" meaning our ever-blessed Saviour. "Making a coffin for your master Julian," was the tart reply; and it proved no less true than it was severe.

It is needless to bring forward any more instances of the judgments which even in this world fell upon the persecutors of the early Church. Numberless examples might be named not only among emperors, but among governors and inferior officers also. And, making every allowance for the natural inclination of the sufferers to look upon whatever misfortune befell their oppressors as a judgment, we must confess that the power of God is most clearly shown in the fate of many who in those days ventured so boldly to set up themselves against His Almighty Will. From the birth of Christ to the time of Constantine, a period of somewhat more than three hundred years, the Romans had no less than *thirty-seven* emperors, without reckoning those who reigned jointly with them, or any usurpers opposing them. During the seven hundred and seventy years which have passed since William the Conqueror, England has only had *thirty-four* kings. So that, in the short reigns and rapid changes of the cruel persecuting emperors of heathen Rome, we may see a strong proof, that the punishment of their crimes had found them out, even upon earth, and in the midst of all their luxury and grandeur. And here it is impossible to help drawing a comparison between the condition of the proud unbelieving persecutor and that

of the humble suffering believer. Upon the Christian the hand of man was indeed laid heavily, too heavily sometimes for mere flesh and blood to bear up against the pressure ; but nevertheless he did bear up against it, though not in his own strength. God was with him, and he did not therefore care what man could do unto him. Whereas, against the heathen, even in the smiling sunshine of his prosperity, while fellow-creatures were falling down before him to worship him, and thousands stood beside him ever ready to run to do his bidding, the arm of God was often stretched out ; and the miserable man was in an instant smitten, withered away, and swept, as dry leaves, from off the face of the earth by the besom of destruction in the Lord's right hand ! The persecutors of the Church ever were, and ever will be, as the dust before the wind, and the angel of the Lord scattering them.

CONCLUSION.

HAVING now brought to a close our short view of the trials, manners, virtues, and other characteristics of the early Christians, it may be useful, before we take leave of the subject, to inquire what information we have gained from our consideration of it. We have had many facts respecting the state of our holy religion in its early ages placed before us, and "facts," according to one of the writers of those times, "are God's arguments." While we lament the sad blindness too general among men with respect to these most convincing arguments, let us study to avoid any such error ourselves. Perhaps the most striking portion of the history of the early Christians is displayed in the conduct of their martyrs, and to this we shall therefore first direct our attention. Every act of martyrdom supposes two parties, the persecutor and the sufferer, the oppressor and the oppressed. We have seen some of the chief causes of that cruel behaviour so common on the part of the heathens. We find that, acting as they did under the commands of the power of evil, their hearts were inflamed with the fiercest hatred against the most innocent persons, and their eyes covered with the grossest darkness of ignorance respecting the most important subjects. And such a state of mind will sufficiently account for the conduct of the great body of unbelievers when the

Gospel was first offered to the world. But not to do them any wrong, we have observed another circumstance, which tells somewhat as an excuse for them, namely, the evil lives and wicked notions of some who were Christians, or at least called themselves by that sacred, but too often misapplied, name. And if, after reviewing the conduct of the heathen persecutors, we turn to that of the Christian sufferers, we shall find ourselves at no loss to account for the very different principles upon which they acted. The longer we consider the virtues of those Christian heroes whose blood was spilled in laying the foundation of the Church of God, the more we may admire them ; but we shall discover no other cause of these besides that which strikes us at the very first view as their root and main-spring. They were faithful believers in Jesus Christ, and from this their faith sprang all their virtues. Take away from them the knowledge of the Gospel, and that Divine grace which blesses really Christian knowledge, and what would they have been ? What, without these, would have been the noblest martyr that ever sent forth his last breath in a confession of his Saviour and a prayer for his destroyers ? Would he not, but for Christian knowledge and Divine grace, have been a proud, selfish, worldly-minded heathen, differing only in accidental circumstances of natural temper or education from his most unfeeling persecutors, or, it may be, not differing from them at all ?

The next object of our attention among the early Christians is their manners and customs, especially those observed in Divine worship, and in the offices of the Church. And here we cannot, as members of the Church of England, help feeling gratified in discovering how completely, in almost all important and essential points, these agree with our own solemn forms of religion, to which we have, from our infancy, been accustomed. Looking back to the practices of the first believers, we feel the same kind of satisfaction, as any one of us may have experienced, when he has attended Divine service in some part of the kingdom distant from his own abode. The sacred building is not the one to which his eyes are accustomed, and yet the arrangements within it are much the same. The face of the country around it is new, the congregation and clergyman are strangers to him, the building is larger or smaller, neater or more plain, than that of his own parish church. But still the quiet order, the decent solemnity that prevails; the beautiful service, the large portions of Scripture by which it is hallowed, the calm yet zealous exhortations of the preacher, all combine to remind him of the church of his home, the centre of his affections, the place where rest the bones of his fathers, the spot where his dearest ties of affection were sanctified, the sanctuary where his babes were delivered from the sin of Adam and made partakers of the righteousness of Christ. Whilst he remarks

many little points of difference, so great is the general resemblance, that he can almost imagine himself to be in his usual place of worship, joining with his friends and neighbours in the service of God; at least he can feel thankful at being able, even at a distance from them, to unite in the same forms, and address the same words as they do, to the Throne of Grace. Just so have we been, as it were, among Christians far removed from us, not so much in space as by time. We have seen their churches,—the private rooms or burial-places where they used to assemble,—altogether unlike our own. We have seen, too, their customs with regard to Divine worship, and there is much that we do not practise,—nay, some things that we do not approve*. Nevertheless there is a general resemblance between their ways and our own. Our hearts yearn towards them, as being indeed our brethren, in a near and dear, and holy sense. We know ourselves to be members of the same body as they were, and though so many ages have gone by, we have still, on this account, a share both in their trouble and in their joy. Do we behold them suffering?—as fellow-members of the Church we suffer with them. Do we find them honoured?—we cannot but rejoice with them. And when we carry our minds away from the early Christians and their concerns, with what kind of feelings should we return to our own Church and to things present?

* As for example, prayers for the dead.

Can we see its general agreement with the first and purest ages of our holy religion, can we trace its faithful, but not servile, copy of the usages of the early Church, without rejoicing? Can we compare it, first with Scripture, and then with primitive and apostolical times, without feeling those silver cords of affection drawn closer and closer round our hearts, which knit us to the Church of our fathers, and to the land, which, through their wisdom and toils, through their zeal and resolution, has been so long blest with that Church? But ought such feelings as these ever to be suffered to minister at all to pride? Was it our own right hand that planted the place of our vineyard, or was it our own arm that made our branch of the universal Church of Christ so strong for ourselves? Was it our doing, or the doing of our forefathers, that, when the rubbish of Popery was cleared away, those parts of the Christian building which (though formed by the apostles themselves,) were in many other countries swept away along with it, were in England preserved? No; our fathers were but the instruments in the Almighty's hand of procuring such blessings for the land of their birth. The deep learning that placed before the minds of our first Reformers all the records of the earlier ages, the holy zeal that filled them with a kindred spirit, the admirable prudence that enabled them to preserve the wisdom, and to select with judgment the indifferent practices of the

primitive Church ; and, above all, the calm Christian moderation that was in them, and gave them strength to stop in their work of alteration before they had gone too far :—all these great and rare qualities of our English reformers were but so many means of mercy to our country. Through these means it pleased the King of Heaven to stay the fury of that tempest of change, which His word alone could have made to cease. By the learning, the zeal, the prudence, and the moderation, which, in addition to their other good qualities, belonged to the fathers of the English Church, the raging sea of commotion was stilled, and the madness of the people was overawed into a state of calmness and tranquillity. And if with these happy circumstances some untoward ones were mingled, if the worldly goods of our Church have become in too many instances a prey to the hand of the spoiler, if many of our fellow-subjects have not only refused to share in the blessings thus dealt out to us, but have, ever since the time of Queen Elizabeth*, been straining every nerve to rob us also of them, by overthrowing the National Church, have we any just cause to complain ? Do not such trials and troubles belong to us as a branch of that Holy Catholic Church, which always has had, and always

* The very first meeting-house built in England was in 1616, in James the First's time. This is rather an unfortunate time, being too modern for those who respect the early ages, and too old for those who scorn every thing that is not of yesterday.

will have, more or less of tribulation to endure in this world? Shall we not rather glory than mourn over this mark of our Master's approval, that we are made like unto Him, that our Church is often belied, slandered, hated, and plotted against, even as He was?

It seems, then, that we have received much; let us always remember that much will be required of us. While we pretend not to judge them that are without the pale of our Church, and are ready to give them full credit for all their good qualities and actions, and to make every allowance for the effects of education, want of right information, or other causes of their mistakes, let us take heed to our own ways, and cling fast to that body of which we are members. We must beware how we lightly forsake an Establishment whose services and doctrines almost all allow to be scriptural; we must pause before we exchange a ministry, framed by Christ Himself, through His apostles, for any device of man's formation*. No pride of heart, no stubborn impatience of rule, no

* It is almost as sad to see persons halting between two opinions, as to see them choosing at once the wrong one. How often may we hear men praying, in the morning, to be delivered from *schism*, that is, needless separation from the Church; and see them, in the evening, running into the very mischief from which they besought deliverance, hastening to a meeting-house, where schism is taught and practised. If they are conscientious Dissenters, why do they come to church? If conscientious Churchmen, why do they go to a meeting-house? Or if, as some say, it matters not, as far as doctrine is concerned, to

fancied communications from above, must ever be suffered to lead us away from that mild, but wholesome authority, that beautiful order, which the Spirit of God, acting by the apostles, established once for all in every Church that they founded; and of which, afterwards, the same Spirit expressed His approval in His addresses to certain of these Churches*. Nor because our ministers are but men, and partake sometimes of the vices and follies of human nature, may we forsake our communion, and go astray among the endless mazes of dissent. We have a treasure indeed, but it is in earthen vessels; and if on that account we reject it, we do so at our peril. We know that the very first Christians, and even the apostles themselves, were not free from faults; but it was no excuse for the Jews refusing to enter into the kingdom of Christ, that Judas was one of the first preachers of that kingdom. If we wait till we find a body of Christians, none of whose ministers can be accused of grievous faults, we may wait till the end of our lives; we shall not die in the fellowship of any Church, for no such prodigy can be found. The Church of Christ, although Divine in its origin, is in its ministration only human; and how great is the folly of condemning any thing human, merely because it has its faults! And yet how common is

which they go, what is there on the other side to weigh against the authority, antiquity, scriptural character, lawful establishment, and general excellence, of the Church of England?

* See Rev., chap. ii.; and p. 72, *note*.

this folly ! Instead of inquiring whether other institutions are more free from imperfections, instead of comparing one thing with another, and choosing that which has fewest faults, how often do we hear men arguing, as if, to condemn a thing entirely, all that was necessary was to show that it is not perfect ! Upon this absurd principle, a strong case might be made out against early Christianity itself, the professors of which were, as we have seen, by no means free from errors and mistakes.

It is needless to say much on the fate of persecutors, of which a few examples have been brought forward in the ninth chapter. We must take care not to be always finding out in every affliction that happens to our enemies a judgment from Heaven, for that is strictly forbidden in Scripture. But we may be quite sure of the general fact, that, whether a man disgraces the cause of truth, or increases the guilt of error, by persecution, in both cases he is doing wrong, and kindling the Divine anger against himself, unless ignorance is his excuse, or repentance soon follows his crime. Persecutors the Christian Church has always had. When the cross and the torture, the gibbet and the stake, have been at rest, the false tongue, the finger of scorn, the lying lips, and the deceitful heart, have been its instruments of suffering. But these can never materially injure it, indeed their enmity serves but to bear record of the truth.

On the whole, when finishing our review of the state

of the early Christian Church, if we do not leave the subject with feelings of thankfulness for our own advantages, and with a firm resolution never to let go our present blessings, we must be hard-hearted and blind indeed. We may look around us, but where shall we find another nation favoured as ours is,—another Church, purer, or holier, or better administered than our own? “And therefore,” to conclude with the words of one of our old divines, “for one of our nation, and born within the pale of our Church, to separate himself from us, either from dislike of episcopacy, or on pretence of greater purity, I must needs think to be a very dangerous practice. For I no more doubt there is such a sin as schism, than I doubt there is such a sin as murder. And how possible soever it is for salvation to be had in other ways, yet we are much surer and safer here than we can be in departing from it. This is the way that God expects we should walk in, He having not only in His abundant mercy placed us here, but also by all kinds of arguments recommended it to our reason and judgment. How unpardonable therefore must it be to leave this Church, how unjust to betray it, and not to maintain it by all the lawful means we are able; how accountable to God and man shall he be that occasions, contrives, or yields to the ruin of it*!”

* Stanley's Faith and Practice of a Church of England Man, p. 8 and 197; 4th edit. 1692.

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IN order to avoid the incumbrance of too many references, and at the same time to point out the sources whence the information contained in this little work has been drawn, it has seemed advisable to give the following list of the authorities chiefly consulted.

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